

I Changed My Mind

By Mally Mann

I'm sharing my story in the hope that it will reach everyone who needs it. I'm going to need a bit of help with that, so please pass it on. Approved methods are email, printed copies or carrier pigeon! Whatever you can think of, so long as you do not make any changes or edits to the contents or digital format of this book. The right to bind and/or sell this as a book is strictly reserved.

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You'll find some Bible verses in this story taken from my little red NIV Bible.

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For Ella Kathleen, my Oyster and pearl of great price.

* * * *

I had an odd pregnancy. Most mothers spend nine months preparing to have a baby. I spent my pregnancy preparing not to have a baby. After I chose abortion, God changed my plans. I thought my decision not to have a termination was my decision to keep my child. This was not the end of the story.

As my Grandmother said, *“There isn’t a right or wrong decision about you and little Oyster, but the one that’s in God’s Plan for you both.”*

* * * *

Chapter One

I had waited nine days. I was sitting in the bathroom at my friend's house, watching a small pink dot grow stronger. At first I had hoped my period was just late. Then I realised I'd missed it altogether, which could only mean one thing. I stood in the middle of my friend's room, speechless. Eventually, "I'm pregnant" was all I could say. The tears that had come as the pink dot appeared were from fright and disbelief. Now they were tears of isolation. I lay stroking my stomach and telling the little life that I loved it, and that everything would be okay.

Desperately hoping the home kit was wrong, I went to my G.P. and did a urine sample. The result came back positive. I was definitely pregnant. The doctor asked me questions and talked about abortion. I felt numb. I went home and cried, unable to think, let alone 'play God' by choosing abortion. The full impact of what we, who were just friends, had done in a drunken moment hit home. The ease with which a child unplanned by us had come into existence was horrifying and didn't make sense. I was anxious for the baby's father to come back from his holiday so I could tell him. When I told him I was pregnant he didn't believe me.

So my name was down for an abortion. I grieved for my unborn child. I grieved for the hurt I felt towards God and towards myself. I grieved because I had lost my way. I had slept around and walked away from God and now I felt I was going to separate myself fully from Him by killing His creation.

I went to my parents' house and vomited for two weeks, pretending I had caught a stomach bug which was conveniently going around. I texted the baby's father and told him I was going to have a termination. When I returned to Cardiff I was surprised to find no post or phone calls about a termination appointment. My housemates didn't know I was pregnant, so I couldn't ask any direct questions without inviting curiosity. Phoning the surgery, I made an appointment for two days' time as I had horrible morning sickness at all hours of the day and night. The receptionist made so many mistakes that I decided not to complicate things by asking about the termination appointment. I figured I could wait until Wednesday.

Wednesday arrived and I went to the surgery. As I walked into the Doctor's room she asked, "Didn't you have an appointment at the hospital yesterday?"

I swallowed eight times and sat down.

"For what?" I asked. "For a termination?"

"At quarter to three," she replied.

I stared at her and said, "Nobody told me."

Then she went into the miscommunications. I had been told that I would receive a letter or a phone call giving me an appointment; now I was told the letter had to be collected by me from the surgery. The Doctor said it would be waiting for me in reception. She phoned through... and there was no letter. The hospital and the surgery both knew about my appointment, but I didn't.

After assurances from the Doctor that she would sort out the mistake and then phone me, I walked home, suddenly sickened beyond the physical state. I was dressed entirely in black, and have recently realised this was in mourning for the baby I thought I was about to abort.

The phone call came a while later: the hospital refused to give me another appointment because I had missed the first one. I protested that it wasn't my fault, with which the Doctor agreed, saying that she would get me an appointment somewhere. When she rang the next time, the news was worse: none of the hospitals in Cardiff or the Vale would give me an appointment, because I had missed the original one. As you can imagine, by this time I was panicking, especially as time was ticking on and I was nine and a half weeks pregnant. I explained that I couldn't go to England for the termination because that would mean going to my parents' surgery, and staying with them again. I was afraid that they would guess the truth and oppose my decision on moral grounds, especially as my dad was a Vicar. They might try appealing to my faith in Jesus which I didn't want to think about. I just wanted to have the abortion and suffer the consequences of that decision, without them ever finding out, and then spend my life pleading with God to see it from my perspective and forgive me. The Doctor and head receptionist at the surgery told me to come back in two days, by which time they would have an answer for me.

I went to my room that night an absolute wreck of nerves and emotions. And then God stepped in. I was crying out to Him, asking Him to forgive me and help me. As I sat in my bed, some words started coming to mind. It was as if God was speaking directly to me, although I couldn't hear a voice. He told me He had forgiven me when I first said sorry, and He still loved me the same as He always had. A moment later, as I sat thinking about this, I got a text from my friend Camilla. She and her fiancé had been praying for me, and she said they'd received a prayer from God, for me. It went like this:

*"I have already seen him catch his first breath,
I have already heard him cry.
I have already seen him call out your name.
Already heard him ask why?
I have already seen him play in the sand,
Already touched his feet.
Already smelled his soft white skin.
Already watched as he sleeps.
I have already laid down a path for his life.
He has already looked for my face.
I have already heard all your fears and pains.
I have already bathed you in grace."*

I burst into tears of relief because I understood that God was with me in this mess. If God knew how it would figure out, and I believed He did, then I could trust my baby and myself to Him. I

thanked God for this tiny gift of life, and for the privilege of carrying it.

My diary records: I changed my mind.

With Camilla's text committed to memory, I went to sleep at peace for the first time since the baby's conception. When I awoke my resolve was still in place, and I knew that keeping the baby was my final decision. My friend Jan went with me to the surgery to tell them I'd changed my mind. When we got there, before I could say anything the head receptionist took us to one side and said, "It's okay. I've phoned the national board and they'll get you an appointment." I was ready to say "Okay" and go along with the surgery's plans because I don't like inconveniencing people, and I knew this lady had gone to a lot of trouble on my behalf. Thank God for Jan who said, "Mally's changed her mind." The receptionist was so nice; she didn't lecture me or contradict my decision. Instead she said, "We're behind you 110%, whatever decision you make." She then booked me an appointment with the Midwife; this was when the scary bit of reality kicked in. My decision meant I was going to have a baby.

Chapter Two

The following Friday, Jan and I were back for my Midwife's appointment. I had to start thinking about the implications of raising a child as a single mum, as the father had avoided all contact with me since I'd told him. There were so many things to consider: responsibility, which I didn't want; commitment; finances – I was still a student, nearly 2 years through a 3 year course. I wondered about the father's medical history, and if he would give me any information. I thought about Child Maintenance, and decided that if he didn't want to be involved I wouldn't force him to be, by that route or any other. Neither of us wanted to be in this situation, and although I was angry and upset I didn't want this to turn into a case of recrimination; we were both guilty.

Although the hurt was becoming more decisive on his part as each day passed without contact, I wanted to forgive him as God had forgiven me. God had 'already bathed me in grace' and still loved me, so I knew there was hope and forgiveness for me, even though I couldn't understand it. Don't think I didn't go through a whole spectrum of feelings from anger to blame and back again: I did. But I tried not to hate the baby's father. I realised that hating him wouldn't change anything, and would only eat away what happiness I had. I had a lot of hatred for the situation I was in, and for the way things had happened, but I tried to channel it away from people.

So, having decided to keep the baby and not have an abortion, I settled down to the idea of being pregnant. This was a big shock to the system, as I had always assumed I would get married before having children; having children outside of marriage was a big no-no for me, coming from a Vicar's family and being a Christian myself. This affected my next big decision: how was I going to tell my parents?

One of my friends suggested mentioning it at the table – "I'm pregnant. Pass the peas." I thought about wearing one of those 'pregnant' t-shirts back to front and walking out of the room with the picture showing... it all sounded funny, but I was scared. I didn't know how they'd react.

I visited my parents, and sat down to talk with them. My dad asked me why I wanted to defer my third year of Uni. I blurted out, "Because I'm gonna have a baby." It still seems surreal, the ease with which the words came out. There was the expected stunned silence, and then my mum asked, "How come?" at the same time that my dad said, "Well, congratulations!" My response to him was, "That's not how I'm seeing it", and I guess this was how the truth came out. My dad offered me a hug and then my mum said she'd have a hug too. I felt very close to bursting into tears.

Everything seemed a little too straightforward. We sat and talked, and I tried to answer their questions, but the answer to most was, "I don't know" coupled with "I don't really want a baby right now, but I'm not having a termination". My head hurt from all the twists of thought and emotion and practicality I had to deal with. I wanted a solution that would give me back my freedom and wouldn't involve any little life.

My dad mentioned adoption, as an option that would give the baby life, two parents (which I wanted it to have), and still release me from a responsibility I didn't really want. I grabbed hold of this idea as the first solution anyone had passed my way that didn't involve physical death. It was a hard conversation to have; my dad has worked with several people who have been adopted, are adoptive parents, or have given a child for adoption, and has seen the pain involved in those situations. He told me it would be very difficult to give my own baby for adoption, and I would have to be prepared for this.

Afterwards, I went upstairs and cried at the thought of being separated from my baby. I know it doesn't make sense reading this, because I seemed to have two conflicting opinions within me. That was my reality for nine months. I returned to Cardiff that evening with a clearer idea of my situation. Within two weeks I was on the phone to my parents, crying and saying I didn't want to give the baby for adoption. I wanted to keep it.

My mum reminded me of all the things I'd said, and my reasons for deciding in favour of adoption in the first place. I went to stay with them again and they encouraged me to write a letter to close family friends, outlining the situation and asking for their support in prayer or thought in my decision to give my baby for adoption.

Looking back now, it seems mad that I ever made a decision so hastily, but I wanted a concrete plan to get me through the months ahead and offer me hope at the end. I wanted a good plan for the baby and me. I wanted the baby to have two parents who were together and didn't hate each other, so that it would grow up knowing it was very much loved and a part of God's plan, even if not humanly intended. I didn't see how I could raise a child on my own as my tenancy in Cardiff would run out before the pregnancy was over. I would be homeless and penniless, with no father for the baby. I cried uncontrollably as I wrote the letter. I have the piece of paper on which my dad made notes to tell me what to say and how to start the letter. I didn't know what to say, but he did. He wrote these lines for me:

I am expecting a baby, due 4th October.

I have arranged for the baby to be adopted by a couple who can give it the proper parenting I, as a single student, am unable to give.

From this hateful script I produced a letter so similar to my dad's script and parents' subsequent Christmas letter that people have actually asked me if my parents wrote it. It went like this (I hate it):

Dear

I am writing to share some news with you that may come as a surprise.

I am expecting a baby, due on 4th October. The baby's father and I were never boyfriend and girlfriend, but were friends. However, he does not want to have anything to do with the baby or me. As a consequence of his response, my financial position (as a single student) and above all, my Christian standpoint, I have decided that the most loving way forward for the baby and everyone

else involved is to arrange for a couple to adopt it. In this way, the baby will have a Dad as well as a Mum, and can be given the upbringing I am unable to provide. It will also be brought up in a loving family where it will never be a cause for resentment or embarrassment, but will be a chosen and wanted child.

Having said that, please do not think I am trying to shirk responsibility, or that I do not have very deep feelings about this. Bringing a life into the world is a huge responsibility, as is choosing a couple who will be its parents. The pain of separation after carrying and giving birth to the baby will be considerable, despite my assurance that it is the right thing for me to do.

I would greatly appreciate your prayers throughout these next few months, and after the birth, as I will return with nothing. In that time I will be living at home with my parents, in order to recover physically, spiritually, emotionally without trying to juggle academic studies at the same time. I will start my third year in January, concluding my degree in January 2005.

I have written to you in order that you may know the truth of the situation, and need not hear a 2nd-hand bungled version of events.

Please pray that I will be open and responsive to God's guidance.

May I also add that I leave this information with you in confidence that you will use discretion and discernment when wondering whether to share it. Whilst I am not trying to hide this (and it would be difficult to!) it is not something to be proclaimed like the expectancy of a planned baby.

Chapter Three

I had a lot of support from most of the friends to whom I sent the letter, although some pointed out the embarrassment my family must be feeling, which was unnecessary. I was only too aware of my family's feelings, and paid for them throughout my pregnancy and thereafter. The supportive friends said:

You are in our thoughts and prayers.

You have such honesty. You are so brave. We admire your courage and our hearts go out to you. It cannot be easy, wrestling with such difficult issues.

We feel privileged to be taken into your confidence. We are humbled and honoured that you would share this with us.

It could not have been easy to write this letter.

My uncle wrote:

I can just imagine what an awful time you must have had over the past few months with your life turned upside down, new worries, illness and very difficult decisions to be made. Thank you for your clear and thoughtful letter which helps us understand your situation. Please be assured that you are much loved by all the family here and we will be supporting you in our thoughts and prayers over the coming months.

My Godmother wrote, observing:

Of course, in terms of the 'ordinary' world, your situation is common, but in your world – your faith, your church, your family set up and aspirations, you have had to understand and face up to probably a lot more and different moral, emotional and spiritual reactions than usual. You are an intelligent and sensitive young woman and I think that through this experience you will be able to understand and help people in ways which you could never do before.

My friend Lesley said:

We will be praying that you will have God's peace about your decision, whether you stick with the present one, or change your mind later. Whatever happens once the baby is born we shall be praying that the Lord's in charge of that baby. Your baby is so special, and known to him. No baby is an accident in his eyes. Your baby will be (is already) such a prayed-over baby, you can trust him/her to God's care. Psalm 139:13-16. But we shall be praying for you too, Mally. My heart bleeds for you if you do have to go through this parting and I pray you will be comforted in your loss and that the pain will fade in time, though of course the memory never will. God can bring good out of the most horrendous messes.

My best mate Ian wrote out these verses for me:

Isaiah 41:9,10 which says:

“I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.’”

Proverbs 19:23:

“The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.”

My friend Sylvia wrote:

I wished after reading your letter I could have given you a great big hug, so if you felt someone holding you it was me.

Sharon said:

When reading your letter I was so thrilled to hear the news, but when I read on I was so hurt for you and you have been on my mind so often.

Tracy wrote:

All I hope is that you are not hurting too much. The lump in my throat was so large I wanted to give you a very big hug. Putting into words, not wanting to write the wrong words to upset you, just to let you know we love you and understand this could be very difficult. Please take care of yourself.

Another lady wrote:

It is a brave decision you’ve made to have your child adopted – and I’m sure you will feel ‘up and down’ about that decision right up to the time – and beyond.

Jan directed me to [City Care](#), a Crisis Pregnancy Counselling service based in Cardiff. My Counsellor Karen was fab. She allowed me to say whatever I wanted, and I knew that anything I did say wouldn’t go beyond her and the four walls. This was so freeing. She helped me think about my options and the implications thereof, and together we went through the pros and cons of parenting versus adoption.

Here are the lists:

Adoption – It’s the most loving option, because I love him, not because I don’t care.

Pros:

Gets a daddy and mummy

I don’t have to look after him

No stinky nappies
I can finish my degree
I can have the job etc. I want with freedom from sole responsibility of him
No sleepless nights
No resentment
I would know a bit about it without having to be responsible
Don't have extra finances to worry about
Won't be a single mum
Won't have to be socially isolated
Can still be mad, young, free and single
Can still travel
Easier to meet somebody
Good quality first years of marriage
Gives the baby and me the best chance in life
Completes the family for the adoptive parents

Cons:

Have to give baby away
He might not want to get in touch when he's older
I won't know what his voice sounds like
Have to come to terms with the whole thing
People asking where the baby is
Dealing with people thinking I've made the wrong choice
Worrying what if I never have kids
Being able to go through with it
Going home with nothing
The time before it's legal
Finding the right parents

Parenting

Pros:

I will have my baby for evermore
My parents will see their grandchild, and the wider family
I love him

God is his daddy
I watch him grow up and develop
Being able to teach him about God

Cons:

Sleepless nights
Screaming, smelly, puking baby around
No partner to help
I am 100% responsible for him
I have to put off my degree for at least a year and chances of finishing it are slim
Affects future career moves, where I live, etc.
Financially difficult
Think about childcare and the right choices
Pressure on family
Pressure on outset of a marriage
I'm in charge of disciplining it
Nobody to take over
Nobody to back you up
It won't appreciate the sacrifices I'm making for him
Can't travel around the world
No form of transport
Forces me to change social groups

Karen also showed me a video called [*The Adoption Option*](#) by CARE. In it, a young woman who had given her baby for adoption shared her story. She cried on the video, because she loved her baby, and this was a huge solace to me for months. She was real about the pain of giving her baby. She shared how when she was pregnant she had been unable to sleep one morning at two o'clock. She had sat outside and it had rained for two minutes, as if God was sharing her grief.

This matched with a vision my brother had shared with me a couple of years before. I was being prayed for at an outreach meeting, and my brother had a vision. In it, God was holding my face and crying into my eyes. He said, "These are the tears I'm crying for you."

At the time, I thought this picture referred to something else I was going through, and I thought it was a bit extreme. However, when I watched *The Adoption Option* and saw someone else having the same experience, it made sense. It makes even more sense now, seeing all that God has brought me through.

My tenancy ran out in June and I left Cardiff to live with my parents. I sorely missed my counselling sessions with Karen. Now, implementing the practical steps for keeping my baby was up to someone else. Karen had been an advocate for me, as had Jan, but now I was with my parents I had little choice but to pursue the route of adoption. I did not have an assigned Counsellor again until I was given a Social Worker in preparation for giving the baby for adoption.

My Midwife talked things through with me, but whenever we'd spoken together someone (usually my parents) would come and reinforce through verbal battery the reasons why I should choose adoption.

I wanted someone to sit and cry with me without reminding me what a good thing I would be doing in giving my baby to complete someone else's family. I wanted to be allowed to really cry, and get out the hurt of all the things people had said and advised, and then be gently helped to prepare for the arrival of my baby.

Chapter Four

Throughout my pregnancy I was the subject of many people's condemnation. A lot of Christian friends and acquaintances told me how wrong I was for getting myself into this situation. It was as though they thought the baby's father had been nothing to do with it, and that I'd got what I deserved when he abandoned me. To them, the fact that he was not a Christian when I supposedly was served as further ammunition for their attacks. They liked to wag their self-righteous heads at me, and say that his leaving me was a judgment from God.

I think that assumption misses the point. It was easy for me to be a target for their condemnation *because* I was alone. Had the baby's father been a Christian and left me, they'd have been able to criticise him for leaving me. But somehow, because the guy I'd slept with was not a Christian, they thought this justified their persecution of me, as they couldn't shout at him. They didn't know who he was, and I didn't tell them. It was none of their business. They hated me because they were afraid of the reality of my situation, and wanted someone to victimise to help themselves feel more secure. This way, they could use me as an example of what not to do, rather than as a living witness of God's grace and mercy in action.

As Jesus explains in Luke 7:36-50, "He who has been forgiven little loves little." I, having been forgiven a lot, loved God a lot. Yet despite my right standing with God Who had forgiven me the moment I asked Him to, those around me tried to give me a complex about my sin. They could not stand the fact that I had repented before God and been forgiven.

It didn't look good that there was a Christian girl with a swelling belly, as it showed that even the people saved by Jesus messed up.

As one more mature friend pointed out, because my sin was so obvious it was far easier to deal with. The difficult sins to deal with are the ones everyone denies because they are hidden.

I received condemnation and dirty looks, or the silent treatment from a lot of churchgoers. Unlike Jesus responding to the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11, these people wanted to throw stones at me. It was easier to hurl abuse at me, because they couldn't control me or keep me in a neat Christian box, than it was to love me and forgive me as Jesus had.

They constantly reminded me that what I had done was very wrong, as if I didn't know that myself. They didn't want to have to associate with me because I made them feel uncomfortable. If I started to enjoy myself in their company they liked to take me aside and just check that I had repented, and make sure I remembered that I was a sinner. Instead of allowing me to move on, free in Christ, they liked to hold me to my sins because it made them feel better about themselves.

When they heard on the grapevine that I was thinking about giving my baby for adoption they came to me under the guise of ‘a friendly chat’ and enthusiastically gave their approval to such a plan. They had absolutely no idea what it cost to be in my situation, let alone to consider giving my baby away.

However, as time went on and I got bigger and could no longer hide my bump – which I had often felt forced to do, out of shame – I felt pressured into choosing the adoption option. I didn’t want to give my baby but I wasn’t allowed to feel any joy about its life. One of my housemates had a go at me one time for walking through our front room in front of his Christian Union friends without hiding my bump.

My brother said he didn’t think God had a plan for this baby’s life, and he was not alone. Many people reiterated this lie, saying that the baby was not intended by God. I choose to differ. The Bible tells me that God creates life, that He forms us in our mother’s womb and that He has a plan for our lives.

Just because nobody else could see what God was doing through my pregnancy and my baby’s life did not negate the truth of His plan for us individually and together. If nothing else, me being pregnant and a Christian made people sit up and think about what they believed, and decide whether or not they wanted to follow a God Who would forgive someone like me, and worse still, bless me.

They deemed that I was still in my sin because I was still living out the consequences of it. Because I was still pregnant they saw that I was still wrong. This is why they were so adamant that I should give my baby for adoption. Had I done so, the sin would have been out of sight, out of mind.

They projected the sin onto the baby, and decided that the baby would be a heathen child, not wanting God to have a plan for its life and not wanting salvation for it, because that would be too awkward to explain in Christian circles.

They did not care what the cost would be to me of being separated from my baby. They did not care what happened to it so long as they would never have to meet it.

These were the same people who then said, “How could you have thought of giving her away?” when I had Ella back. They didn’t want me to come back to Cardiff and live amongst them with the fruit of my sin – an actual living person – there for all the world to see. They hated the fact that God had clearly said to me, “My unmerited favour rests upon you” in June before I had gone to my parents for the second half of my pregnancy. They said I must have misheard Him; He would not say that.

Well, He did.

When I got to my parents’ house, things were no better. My parents wanted me to give the baby for adoption because they said that this would be best for me. This would give me the opportunity to get on with my life and not fail my degree. I wanted my life to move on *with* my baby, but this

thought was not entertained by them so I felt unable to express it.

I think they wanted to maintain the façade that everything was well with them. It was too easy to set me up as a martyr who had recognised her sin and would then atone for it by giving away her dearly loved baby. In this way I could become the demure, quiet girl they'd probably hoped I would be, and this would keep me out of further trouble.

This, however, was not God's plan for my life. Hallelujah!! God sent Jesus so that I wouldn't have to try to atone for what I had done wrong. There was no way I could ever make the situation right by myself. I needed Jesus to forgive me, and Jesus to set me free. Jesus to stay by my side, Jesus to fight for me, Jesus to make a way where there was no way.

My only true option was to keep my baby, but in the environment of that summer I was not allowed to voice it clearly. I was reminded frequently that I had no money, no house, nothing for looking after a baby, no job, no degree and no prospects. My dad also reminded me that "this isn't a hotel, you know!" one time when I didn't want to talk to them any further about my 'decisions'.

I locked myself in the bathroom and cried out to God. I said I needed a hug and didn't know what to do. As I sat there alone on the floor, I felt someone put their arms around me and hold me close. There was no one visibly in the room except me, but I felt so comforted to know that God was with me.

When I came out of the bathroom, my brother came and sat with me. He asked me what was wrong and sat and cried with me. Then he shared this vision with me: You're standing at the top of a cliff and you can see over the fields. There are shadows, but then the sun breaks out. God says He's leading you into the good land you can see; a land flowing with milk and honey.

My parents had originally said they would look after the baby for a year while I finished my degree, but they soon changed their minds. When I came to live with them after my student tenancy had expired I knew that I was on shaky ground. I would have no roof over my head if I kept the baby. There was space for me, but not for me and the baby. I needed out, but there was no way out. I just had to bide my time, answer people's hurtful, impertinent questions, and wait for the baby to be born.

During this time I named my bump Oyster. This was because I didn't want to keep calling it 'it'. Giving my bump a name was a way of connecting to the little person I could feel kicking, and about whose life I was trying to make such important decisions. Naming my bump also stopped me from feeling hurt at the impersonality of referring to the bump as 'it', as though I didn't care who Oyster was. Oyster seemed a fitting name; this was my pearl of great price whose true beauty had not yet been seen. Also, like a grain of sand rubbing against an oyster and creating mother of pearl through irritation, Oyster was creating beauty in my life through rubbing against all my previous thoughts and actions and forcing me to accept responsibility and reality. The irritation of this originally unwanted situation has certainly developed something of inner beauty in my life. I tore out a page of the *Radio Times* which read "Any day now my beautiful one". I put it in the baby box my friend

had given me for mementos to do with the bump and me. It summed up how I felt about the little person who was growing on the inside.

Chapter Five

When I was wondering what to do it seemed that everybody had an opinion. Neighbours, parishioners, strangers in the street. People would notice my young face and bare hands (no wedding or engagement ring) and ask me what had happened. It was as if the world and his wife felt they had a right to my life and to my unborn baby.

Nobody who advocated adoption really cared what happened to the baby, or what sort of parents it got, so long as it was out of the way. Those who thought I ought to keep the baby were openly hostile and rude. Through it all, nobody but God knew or understood how I felt, or knew the truth of mine and the baby's lives.

People brazenly asked me if I had been raped, whether they knew the baby's father, what his name was, what I was going to do, where I was going to live, what my parents thought... and more. I kept as many details as I could to myself, but found the constant bombardment so hard to deal with.

People also acted as though they had a right to the baby before it was born. They spoke as though they had ownership of it, because I was considering giving it away.

Had I been with the baby's father, or anyone else for that matter, I bet you they would not have asked anything except the due date. People felt they could abuse my privacy and my feelings because I was alone. I was a target too because my dad was the Vicar. People watched like vultures to see what would happen, hoping for some dramatic turn of events, like me being kicked out of the house.

Things were tough and arguments heated, but I didn't get kicked out. Maybe it was because my parents loved me, or maybe because that way they could keep control of the situation. I wanted them to love me and help me, but also allow me to make my own choices as an adult, and not force me into thinking about adoption when I wanted just to enjoy my pregnancy. I did enjoy the physical aspects of pregnancy, but this was hugely affected by being under siege emotionally.

Chapter Six

A lot of people were kind and helpful during my pregnancy, but often the kindness wounded because it was not sought by me. People's constant advice and opinions became a hindrance. The more people talked at me, the less I could hear what *I* thought. Their arguments were very convincing and left no room for me to say, "But actually, I would like to find a way to keep my baby."

The people who were supportive of me keeping the baby were often so aggressive in their speech that I felt like a villain, and didn't know how to tell them that I agreed with them. They were hostile because they thought I didn't love my baby, when actually I was besotted with it and constantly talked to my bump.

It was just that I didn't know how to combat the fears and real problems of housing and finance, as well as being shunned by family and friends. Whenever I spent time with the people who thought I should *keep* the baby, I was made to feel like a monster who didn't care. When I spent time with the people who thought I should *give* the baby I felt like a slut who cared too much.

There was no middle ground.

I cared so much about Oyster. Whenever I spoke about adoption or anything that might hurt the baby I put my hands on my bump and said, "Close your ears". If people were attacking me verbally I would quietly place my hands on my bump to reassure the baby, and attempt to block its ears although I had no idea where they were. I didn't want Oyster to feel unloved. I didn't want my baby to come into the world injured and wounded by the sad environment it had developed in. This is why I covered Oyster in prayer.

I spoke a lot with Ian. I could trust him to listen to me and not bombard me with opinions. I stopped listening to my friend Jan because she kept pushing the keeping line. I knew I didn't want to be parted from my baby, but it really didn't help having people reminding me what I truly wanted to do. I just needed SILENCE to be able to feel it all and think through it all *for myself*. I wanted silence to think alone without being biased by circumstance or other people's opinions, however well-meaning.

Chapter Seven

When I was 30 weeks pregnant I got a letter from a friend in Cardiff. This lady had phoned me the day before and asked how I was doing and which way my thoughts were going. At this point, I was telling people I wanted to keep my baby.

My friend wrote:

Dear Mally

I was glad to have a chance to talk on the phone and to hear your news, and what is happening with you. I want you to know that we are thinking of you and praying for you.

I have hesitated to write to you because I did not want to put unnecessary things in your mind when I know you have so many difficult issues to handle. However, I feel that I should let you know our own situation, but do not want this to put you under any pressure.

Until the Sunday when A and I prayed with you I was not aware that you were pregnant. As both A and I said then, we do not know what is the right decision for you. The Lord will help you and make His good plan for you and the baby clear.

When we prayed with you I mentioned in passing that I knew of a couple who were wanting to adopt a baby. What I did not say was that it was our daughter and her husband. After treatment they cannot have children. This has been a major disappointment to them as they both love children and very much want a family. They are both committed Christians, and after prayer and having looked very carefully into adoption, feel that the Lord wants them to adopt. They have approached the local Social Services and the process will begin in some months time.

Since talking with you I had a totally unexpected conversation with a lady, unconnected to the church or you, who told me of two private adoption arrangements in her family. The conversation made me think of your situation and I felt I should at least make you aware of the possibility.

After our conversation on the phone today I have hesitated to send this to you, though the letter was already written. However, in case you decide adoption is right [I realise it may not be] I felt it was only fair to you to put all options before you.

We do not, in any way, want to influence your decision but felt that it was right to give all the information to you. I wanted to write, and not mention this on the phone, so that you will be able to consider the possibility fully without any pressure to respond. If you wanted to know more I would be more than happy to tell you any detail I am aware of.

After talking on the phone I wondered if you wanted to see Karen or anyone else neutral to discuss things. We have a spare room here and you would be welcome to stay for a few days. You could also have a break and see friends around.

Once again may I re-state that I do not want to put any pressure at all on you in regard to the future of you and your child.

Be assured of our prayers and very best wishes.

With love

After reading this letter, I remember sitting in the bath thinking, “I ought to feel angry, but I feel at peace.” I started describing this as ‘the peace which passes all understanding’ from God. I could not explain why I felt at peace despite having received such a letter.

I know my friend stated that she did not want to influence my decision or put me under any pressure, but the fact was that she had. So many people said or did things that were to their minds well-intentioned, but which to me came across as manipulative and coercive.

This letter stands as an example of how *not* to address a woman or girl in my situation.

It showed the ignorance of so many people. Not only did my friend not know the proper procedure for adoptions, wherein I would not have been allowed to pick the couple myself, but she also made the mistake of giving me information overload.

So many friends and others gave me all the information they could find on adoption, thinking they were being helpful, when really they were further burdening and confusing me. I did not know what to think.

I could see that adoption was a good option for some people, but it was as though people had found an outlet to talk about a rather hidden topic and were determined to share their findings with me, no matter what it cost me. They gave me so many troubled days and nights as I tried to sift through all the thoughts and feelings and opinions thrown my way. I was told of a few adoption ‘success’ stories, but only a handful of people shared keeping stories with me.

I wanted someone to sit down with me, as Karen had, and phone the relevant organizations to find out about benefits, housing, help, job options, my University options and so on. I wanted to be taken seriously as a mother – here I was with a big bump, but no one would talk to me about keeping my baby.

Having read my friend’s letter I felt at once peaceful and angry. The peace was two-fold; part of it was because I knew that God was in control and He would sort my situation out in accordance with His plans.

The other part was more upsetting.

I felt that my friend’s kindness had silenced me. I did not feel permitted to be angry with her because she had said how she didn’t intend to influence or pressurise me. The thing was, she *had* put pressure on me and *had* influenced me.

The letter was sent after she had phoned me. I had thought she’d phoned because she cared.

However, this showed that the phone call was really a testing of the waters. She was setting herself up as the kindly friend, so as to leave me open and vulnerable.

Then she jumped in with her letter, sending it despite her hesitation. She had found me not receptive to the idea of adoption when she phoned, but she wanted to push the idea, because she didn't want her daughter and son-in-law to be childless.

Disguised as the caring mother – theirs, not mine – she came to rob me of my own child.

It was like with my parents and so many others; no one cared what it cost me to give my baby. They were willing to do anything to help me *give* my baby, but they were not willing to pay the price to help me *keep* my baby.

What turned me against the idea of contacting my friend over her idea was the fact that I would have seen my baby again. She and her husband went to the same church as me, so whenever her daughter and son-in-law and (my) baby had visited them, they would have come to church and I would have seen my baby, but it would not have been mine.

Also, another of their daughters was my age. I couldn't bear the thought of her being Aunty, being able to hold my baby when I wouldn't be allowed to. The fact that she was my age just made it worse. So I decided against it.

A short while later, this friend told me that her daughter and son-in-law had conceived naturally, much to everyone's surprise and delight. This, I am sure, is why God gave me a peace about it. He knew that I wouldn't have to give my baby to them because He was going to give them their own baby.

Chapter Eight

Following a holiday in Scotland visiting Ian, my parents drove me to meet a woman who dealt with adoptions. The aim was to sit and talk through my options, but really it was just an opportunity to further coerce me into deciding to give my baby. I was 32 weeks pregnant.

I remember the lady asking me what the pros were of giving my baby for adoption. I said that I'd be able to finish my degree. My dad said, "Come on, you can think of more than that." I felt like a naughty child hauled up in front of headmaster, tongue-tied. I could not think of another single reason that might benefit me if I gave my baby away.

I remember sitting with this lady feeling so down and so alone. I wanted to cry and find out why my parents were so keen for me to be parted from my little one.

Exactly two weeks later, I overheard my dad saying to my brother, "It doesn't matter what decision she makes, as long as she makes a decision!"

That afternoon, unexpectedly, everyone but me happened to be out of the house for a few hours. This afforded me a rare bit of space to myself. I seized the opportunity and phoned a Counsellor, talking *without being listened to* for three hours. By the end of the phone call I had made my decision: I was going to give the baby for adoption.

I remember sitting in a car park with my mum that evening, having gone to buy food, saying I had made a decision. I told her what it was and then cried, saying it felt like the beginning of the end.

When I told my dad he said, "But you don't really want to give your baby away, do you?" I felt exasperated! I thought this was what he wanted, after overhearing his comment earlier that day.

Chapter Nine

From the moment I knew I was pregnant I'd had a picture in my mind of a baby boy with dark hair. I was so sure I was carrying a boy that I never asked what sex Oyster was at my scans. When I received Camilla's text at 10 weeks pregnant I became convinced that I was going to have a boy. The name I had chosen for my son was Joshua Jeremiah.

I named him after two verses which people gave me when I was pregnant. The first verse is Joshua 1:9 which says:

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go. "

The second verse is Jeremiah 29:11 which says:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. "

I held onto these verses and God's promises within them. I pictured Joshua growing and playing, and thought about him so much. I prayed for him, specifically using his name, and it never occurred to me that I might have a girl.

I wanted a boy because I knew he couldn't get pregnant and be abandoned by the father. If I'd thought I was having a girl I would have gone ahead with a termination.

All this showed me that internally I was thinking deeply about keeping my baby. I was thinking about Oyster's future. The complete mental picture I had of Joshua during pregnancy underlined the fact that I wanted to have life with this little lad.

I didn't want to give him. I could theorise about how adoption was the best thing for him until the cows came home, but I couldn't give a single honest reason for why it would be right for *me*.

I knew that God had a plan for this baby's life – Oyster was no accident in His eyes – and He had a plan for me too. I just kept assuming that the plan was for us to be apart. I certainly didn't want to part with my baby, but I knew I couldn't seriously consider keeping him because of the worries over the practical side of raising him.

I didn't have a home, any money, or any prospects as far as I could see. Fear prevented me from exploring my options and thinking about what was best for me. It was far easier to focus on the baby and what would be best for him, in a plan where I could see all the steps. I didn't want to trust anyone, not even God, with more than I could see.

Chapter Ten

My Social Worker asked me what I would call the baby if it were a girl, the day before I gave birth. I said I'd have to see her and see if the name I'd thought of was right for her. I just couldn't picture a girl.

When Ella was born, the name fitted her. It was definitely her name, and reflected the character I wanted her to have; she is named after my Great-Grandmother who was very warm and loving. Her middle name is also a family name, but I didn't know that her two names together, Ella Kathleen, meant 'all pure'.

I was amazed when my mum told me this, because God helped me choose a name for my baby that was so right, even though I didn't know what it meant.

Ella's name showed me how God saw me as all pure, despite everything I'd done wrong, because I'd asked Him to forgive me. He saw me as all pure in Jesus. For Ella herself, her name was a prophecy. I believed she would give her life to Jesus, and through Him, she'd be all pure in God's sight. This was what I wanted for her more than anything else, because belonging to and living for Jesus and letting Him be the guide of your life are, I believe, the reasons why we're here.

Ella's name was also a reminder to me of her namesake's prayer, recorded in 1960. My Great-Grandmother had prayed for and into all the future generations of the family, which would in time include Ella and me. This was a huge comfort to me when Ella was with the Foster Mum, because I knew that she was covered in prayer not just by me and many other people at the time, but that she had been prayed about years before either she or I were born.

* * * *

When Ella was born I was shocked. I was so surprised seeing her that I asked, "What is it?" and was told "It's a girl!" She was so beautiful. She lay on me in a crumpled heap, staring at me for half an hour and I gazed back, drinking in this little beauty. She was God's miracle gift to me.

Over the next two days, she and I lived on separate wards. She was brought to me whenever I asked for her, which was a lot, but otherwise she slept on a different ward so that I wouldn't bond too closely with her. This had been my pre-birth request, when I was about 36 weeks pregnant, because I thought I'd find it too hard to be parted from my baby if I fed, changed, cuddled him and was with him all the time.

Now that the baby was born, however, this plan didn't fit the situation. I needed to be with Ella, but I didn't know how to cope with my feelings and look after her, without wanting to keep her. So I said nothing and we stayed on different wards. The reality that has only dawned on me recently is that I was never prepared to give Ella. I was prepared to give Joshua.

I think I could have gone through with giving Joshua for adoption, however painful it would have been, because I was prepared to. I knew what he looked like and had poured so much prayer and love into his little life that I knew he would be ok.

Although it would have hurt me terribly to have given him, after all the months of agonising over him, I could have done it knowing that it was the best decision for his life.

Ella was a different story. I was a mess after her birth. I wanted space to think and to change my mind, but I also didn't want to be left alone.

I was put on a ward by myself, but the next day a mum came with her tiny newborn. Then came two ladies waiting to be induced. One family hung baby clothes on the end of their bed. I closed my curtain.

When Ella wasn't with me, I was sleeping or crying. I tried to cry silently so I wouldn't disturb anyone else. When the Nurses came round in the evening the day after she was born, they were shocked to find me crying in my bed. "Why didn't you call us?" they asked. I didn't have an answer, because I wanted someone to comfort me but I was afraid I'd be in trouble for changing my mind.

I had nothing prepared for keeping Ella, and nowhere to live. Social Services were geared up to finding an adoptive couple, and I felt guilty about saying I wanted to keep my baby. I felt that I would be withholding joy from someone else. I didn't grasp that it's normal to want to keep your baby. I felt unable to make any decision but I knew I was the only person who could make the decision about Ella's future. I had to decide whether she was going to go home with the Foster Mum, whom I had only met the day before the birth, or with me.

The Nurses were lovely, and came and took photos of Ella with me when she was a few hours old. I wanted photos of us together, so that she'd know how much I loved her even though she wouldn't be with me. I wanted her to have a happy photo of us together, which happened when I shyly told one of the Nurses that she'd got lovely dark hair hidden under the yellow bobble hat they'd put on her head. She demanded that I remove it at once – I didn't know if I was allowed to – and gasped at the little beauty. I've got a big proud grin in that photo!

The nurses also asked me how sure I was about giving Ella for adoption. My maternity notes record that they were concerned by the amount of time I was spending with her, considering I was expecting to give her for adoption. I told them I was 95% certain I wanted to give her for adoption, which wasn't true. I wasn't at all sure, but I didn't know how to stop the gathering momentum of the situation. I had gone through with the pregnancy and given birth, so all that was left to be done now was give the baby.

But I didn't know how I could do that. I spent hours cuddling her and singing songs to her softly, so no one would hear me. I sang over her the blessing from Numbers 6:24-26:

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; the LORD lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace. "

I spent as much time as possible with Ella so that I would have a time with her to remember and carry into the rest of my life. I wanted to remember every detail of our time together, and try and remember her. After she had gone, that was the hardest thing to recall. I wrote down all my memories, but I couldn't feel her weight and her warmth against me. I missed her in every moment. I felt so empty without her in my womb and without her in my arms. I felt utterly purposeless.

While I was still in the hospital I had a decision to make. The momentum of my own pre-birth decisions and expectations were too much to fight against, and in a strange way, I was actually glad of the rest from decisions that this afforded me temporarily. I could rest knowing that Ella would be given to the Foster Mum, and would soon be with her new family. I got swept along by the tide I was too weak to fight.

Giving Ella to the Foster Mum was the hardest thing I've ever done.

As I later wrote in a poem, 'the simplicity of the action makes it possible'. Ella was less than two days old. The Foster Mum arrived and gave her a bottle while I looked on. I asked her to take photos of Ella for me, because I didn't know what her body looked like. I had only seen her for a few seconds before she was weighed after birth. From then on, she'd been under a towel on me,

and then dressed. I wanted to see her feet and know if she had an 'inny' or an 'outy' tummy button. Her tummy button was the only sign that she had ever been connected to me, and was therefore incredibly important to me. The Foster Mum looked at Ella and said, "Oh yes! We'll take lots of photos for Mummy, won't we?" I thought that was a bit odd; I wanted to be called Ella's Mummy, but I didn't think that was quite proper as she was going to be somebody else's little girl, and that lady would be her mummy.

I cuddled Ella and lay her down in the cot, saying, "And you know I'll always love you." The Ward Matron said, "Now you're making me cry." I asked if I could have one more cuddle with her, because I didn't feel quite ready to leave yet. As I held Ella she opened her eyes. She calmly lay in my left arm and sucked the fingers of her right hand. My mum put her hand on my back. My brother took a photo. I cuddled Ella and whispered a prayer. My tears fell on her soft hair, and I kissed her little head. Then I laid her in the Foster Mum's lap and turned away.

As I passed one of the ladies waiting to be induced she said, "Good luck with everything." I hadn't told anyone why Ella wasn't coming with me, but the truth seemed to hit as my brother walked me out of the ward.

The family with the baby clothes on the end of the bed stared at me in silence. I couldn't control my tears. I turned at the door to look at Ella one last time. Then we left.

I stared at a wooden wire and bead toy in the foyer before walking outside. The doors opened behind us and the Ward Matron came running out. She had paperwork for the baby photo that had been taken of Ella at one day old. She said it would be posted to me at my parents' address, and then she gave me a hug. She was crying.

Once we were in the car, Mum drove round to the supermarket and went to buy sandwiches. My brother and I sat playing I-spy in the car. He told me months later that it seemed so trivial and crass, following on from leaving the hospital and Ella. He said, "Nothing in my life prepared me for walking out of that ward with you." Yet at that moment I was glad to play I-spy, and keep my mind on normal things.

When Mum returned I asked, "We didn't leave anything behind, did we?" I knew I had just left behind the most important thing in the whole world to me: my baby. But I needed to talk about something normal, to try and comprehend what had just happened and to get beyond the scene that kept playing in my head. Over and over I kept seeing myself walk away from Ella.

With all the guilt and pain of wrangling over decisions that I'd had throughout my pregnancy, it all culminated in this one point: the moment at which I got up and walked away from my baby.

The rest didn't matter. I could have changed my mind, kept her, and said the turbulent pregnancy was just down to nerves and denial. But now I had done it. I'd actually made a decision. I thought I'd been making decisions all along when I was pregnant, but really they were just suggestions and plans. They were not decisions and actions.

The journey to my parents' house was made in silence. We dropped my brother at the train station and then drove back in the gathering gloom of an autumn dusk. My parents lived in a valley, so everything got darker and the situation more final as we wound our way downhill.

When we arrived at the house my dad opened the front door, and I remember being struck by the way the light from inside the house seemed too full and bright to stay inside. The brightness of it was painful as we went in.

The house was exactly as I'd left it only two days before, but now I had nothing. My bump was gone. Oyster was gone, Joshua was gone, and Ella had made her surprise entrance, and gone.

My mum and dad steered me into the lounge and we sat on the sofa with me between the two of

them. It was reminiscent of them hugging me when I'd told them I was pregnant. This time my dad said, "I expect it all feels very empty now." The dam behind my eyes, at the back of my throat, burst. I cried and they sat with me.

Chapter Eleven

I bought a ring when Ella was ten days old as a physical sign that she was real, that she was alive and that my experience was real. It was easy for everyone looking on not to see what I had come through.

The ring was something for me to keep, seeing as I didn't have Ella. I just had a saggy body and an aching heart. I needed a physical symbol to remind me of my daughter because I had no bump and no baby. I wanted something to show physically that I had gone through my months of pregnancy and anguish, so that I wouldn't have to hold the knowledge only in my mind. The ring was for me to keep, because the Foster Mum had Ella temporarily and the adoptive parents would keep her forever.

I chose it really carefully. I went with my Mum, and the lady in the shop asked what it was for. I said it was for me, to remind me of my baby daughter. I didn't say what had happened. I didn't want to share that – Ella was only 10 days old. I didn't want to break down in front of this stranger.

I just wanted to find a beautiful ring and go home with my grief. To me, the ring was a sort of grave. It was as if Ella had died, because she was not with me and I did not expect to ever see her again. I hoped she would come and find me when she was 18, but I feared that she wouldn't. I was so afraid that she wouldn't want me. I was afraid that she'd reject me, feeling that I had rejected her. So my ring was a designated place to 'go' to think about her. I wore it all the time, because I didn't have my baby to carry around. It was no replacement, but it helped me to have it on my finger to turn around, to have something to do, and to help me to pray for Ella.

I wanted a beautiful ring that would remind me of how beautiful Ella was, and just how valuable she was to me. I didn't want a cheap scrubby dirt-tarnished ring. I wanted something that would symbolize my love for her and my sacrifice for her. Something she would be given upon my death, whether she'd ever come and found me or not.

I wanted it inscribed with 'Oyster', and the date of her birth. However, the rings I was looking at didn't have space on the back of them for any inscription. The lady said, "Well, you don't need her name on it - you're not gonna forget it are you?" I didn't want to explain that my baby wasn't with me. She asked how old my baby was; I told her. Then she said to my Mum, "So are you getting lots of cuddles?" Mum kind of nodded and said yeah, but neither she nor I knew what to say.

I bought a ring with three intertwining strands of gold: white, rose and yellow gold. I wanted three strands to show there was one for Ella, one for me, and one for God. One for me, one for her, one for her biological father. One for God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. One for me, one for her, one for my future husband. One for each child I hoped to have. I wanted to have two children by whoever I married, because I wanted one more with my husband than I'd had

without a husband.

I took it off about a year and a half ago because I felt the mourning and grieving of Ella was over. I have days when I still feel sad about the time I didn't have with her, because looking back it doesn't seem that that time of separation was necessary. I know God's used it in an amazing way in my life, but it seems that it was not necessary and that's hard, because I couldn't see it at the time. At the time I gave Ella for adoption I didn't think I was going to change my mind.

I think I wore the ring again recently because I wanted to remind myself of what we've come through. Ella has asked me about the ring and she knows it's the ring I bought when she was born.

I took it back off a few weeks ago, after crying whilst typing parts of this book. I prayed and asked God to fill the gap of those seven-and-a-half weeks that I had without Ella that I can never get back. I poured out my heart to Him, saying how nothing could ever replace that time and only He knows what to fill that gap with. After praying I took the ring off and have not put it on since. I do not need to, because I know that God will fill that gap in His own way.

In all of this, allowing God to be God and to work through me instead of trying to do things in my own strength has given me freedom. I am not trying to control silence and fear and anger. God is in control and He has given me the strength to live each day, as well as the words to write this book.

I remember getting very upset when Ella was two weeks old. My Social Worker had mentioned in passing something about making sure that the Foster Mum would get her fees for looking after Ella. I was distraught. It had not occurred to me that anyone would have to be paid to look after my little poppet. I wanted her back more than ever, to show that I would love her and look after her. That was all the payment I needed; to have my darling baby with me. There were many aspects of the adoption process that I only really began to grasp once they were underway.

When Ella was 15 days old my parents and my brother and I had a service in my brother's flat. I had hated the fact that there was no celebration when Ella was born. Coming home, there was no 'Congratulations! It's a Girl!' banner across the window, and there were no balloons. There were not the normal signs of celebration. People sent me cards, but they were sympathy cards, not congratulation cards. The one congratulation card I did receive made me feel wretched, so I hid it behind the sympathy cards.

At the service we held, my dad said some prayers and I was presented with the ring I had bought to wear in Ella's place. It was a very sad morning. We looked at the photos we had of her and lit a candle in her remembrance while I tried very hard not to cry.

I wanted to put a notice in the local newspaper when Ella was born so my mum went with me to the newspaper office. I wanted it to say I was delighted to announce the birth of my daughter, and wanted it to say thanks to my Midwife Siew Gin. However, my mum had other ideas.

The announcement ended up saying that I was ‘pleased’ to announce Ella’s birth. I was very cross, but as usual felt unable to say anything against the iron will of my parents, under whose roof I was staying.

Two weeks before the newspaper notice was printed I had wanted to make some little cards to send to friends and family announcing Ella’s birth. I wanted to use one photo which showed off her beautiful face, and made her distinct from any other baby, but my dad disagreed.

He chose one which was nice enough, but showed Ella fast asleep on her side in one of the plastic hospital cribs. I wanted the photo of her in my mum’s arms (you couldn’t see Mum apart from her thumb) because it showed how long Ella was, as well as the features of her face. I was not allowed to decide.

I wanted the little card to say I was delighted to announce the arrival of my daughter, and then give the details of her date, time, place of birth and birth weight. I wanted to carefully word the bit about giving my beauty for adoption. However, my dad barged in with his own words. As I started typing he deleted my words and wrote his own. The card said:

Announcing the safe arrival of Mally’s daughter

Ella Kathleen Mann

weighing

at

on

Thanks be to God!

Mally gave Ella to her Foster Mum on 6th October, who will care for her until suitable adoptive parents are found.

Your love, support and prayers are greatly appreciated.

I wanted to get the cards done professionally at the printers, but my dad insisted on scanning the pictures himself, and using tacky paper for the cards. It made Ella look as if she had a weird dome head with a receding hairline. I was far from happy.

After Ella had been born and I had given her to the Foster Mum I received lots of cards and letters. Friends said:

You are very much in our thoughts and prayers.

We are thinking of you and love you very much.

God is holding you and Baby Ella.

It must have been a very traumatic time for you – both physically and mentally – and I do hope and pray that you will be able to look forward to the next phase of your life.

My headmaster and his wife wrote:

Dear Madeleine,

Thank-you so much for writing with news of the arrival of Ella – and for the delightful picture!

Yet behind it all we can only guess at the deeply conflicting emotions and pain you must have been experiencing.

Grandma wrote:

It is wonderful to me that the Holy Spirit directed me to play that tape when my mother Ella prayed into the future. I'm quite sure that prayer is timeless and she prayed into the present situation as so many of us do and that our prayers carry all our longings into the future of Ella Kathleen and all of us so that intangibly our lives are 'bound in the bundle of life' with that beautiful little child for her life time.

My childhood best friend sent me a card saying:

Dearest Madeleine,

I really don't know what to say, I'm so sorry that the father of your absolutely beautiful girl didn't want to know. You're one of the most amazing and courageous people I know. I wish I could have known sooner, to have tried to offer some support to you. I'm sure you have lots of love and support from your wonderful family, friends and God.

I can't begin to imagine the pain you must have endured but Ella is a credit to you and how thoughtful and selfless of you to offer her two parents.

I hope that this note offers some praise to you, as you certainly deserve it. I also believe that God had planned for you to have Ella and she is a blessing.

You really are such a wonderful, loving person Mally and I can't reinforce that enough.

You are in my thoughts and prayers and I send you lots and lots of love. Give my love also to your family.

Mum wrote to me when I was staying with Jan and Andy before going to see Ella. She said:

Something I was reading last night – i.e. Psalm 147:3 – ties in with a conversation I had this morning with Rachel (a friend): she asked if you have had any opportunity of prayer specifically for you for healing, in the present circumstances – healing of mind and spirit, of anger, grief, guilt, hurt, loss, any such experiences and emotions, not to mention the sore back!

In November Grandma wrote:

Darling Mally,

My friends and I are all praying with me for you and the future important days (to do with Ella's adoption) They all have the dates in their minds and beyond them your time in which the Lord will show you His plan for you and for little Ella Kathleen.

You have shown and are showing great courage in wanting the best not necessarily as we see it just now for you, but for this darling little child. You love her so much that you put her welfare first and are asking the Lord our dear Heavenly Father what His plan is for her and you.

Lesley wrote again saying:

Dear Mally,

Thanks so much for sending us the photo of your beautiful daughter. As a mum myself I weep for you in the pain of your separation. You have done a very brave thing and your baby has been covered in so much prayer; the Lord will honour that and will send exactly the right adoptive parents to her – perhaps He already has. He has His hand on her and on you, and we will continue to pray for all of you Mally. May God bless you and heal your pain.

Chapter Twelve

How I got through the first few days and weeks without Ella, I cannot recall. I know that God was with me, but I couldn't feel His presence.

Days passed in sleep and tears mostly. I felt numb, as if my life was under general anaesthetic, but I was somehow still awake. I could see and hear, and I could feel the soreness of my stitches healing, but everything else seemed unreal or just beyond my reach. I couldn't grasp hold of the thoughts I wanted to process. I wasn't sure what these thoughts were, but I knew they existed.

Although Ella was sixty miles away from me, I had let-down every time she needed a feed. I had fed her once in the hospital so she would get the benefit of my colostrum, so my milk supply came in and sat in my breasts unused. I was full and sore. My Midwife warned me not to express the milk as that would only make it come again, so I waited for it to leak away. This took months. It was horrible to be so ready physically to look after my baby, and yet not to have her with me.

I felt as if she had died, and whilst I constantly thanked God that she was alive I did also ask why He hadn't let her die so we wouldn't have been parted from each other. In some way I wished she were dead, because then I would be allowed and expected to grieve her loss. I felt I was in a complete limbo land where nothing made sense and I didn't know how I was meant to feel. I was frightened by the enormity of my emotions, and the enormity and yet simplicity of my action in walking away from Ella and starting the process of releasing her from my care.

In this limbo land, I felt I ought to make progress and gradually get my life back on track. With what, I was not sure. But I knew that these feelings of loss, like any loss, would not always be so strong. I just didn't know how long it would take to get past the initial acceptance that this had happened. And that frightened me. I didn't know if it was normal to feel so overwhelmed, and I didn't like how out of control I was when I started crying. But I didn't know how to stop. There was no one to tell me how to expect to feel. I needed someone else's story of their experience. I wanted to comfort and console myself with the knowledge that at least one other person understood, and that I would come through this. This is why I'm sharing my story.

At the point when I needed that help and support I was in no state to get up and go anywhere and look for anything except my baby daughter. She filled my mind and heart constantly. I don't know if I dreamed of her, but I do know I woke many times in the nights with a soggy pillow and tears already running down my cheeks. I called for my parents and they came. They sat with me for hours at night and cried with me, hugged me, held me, read me stories and comforted me in just the way I needed.

Somehow the nights were much, much easier than the days. At night no one was moving around, getting on with life as though nothing had happened. I think, rather like in W. H. Auden's poem *Funeral Blues*, I wanted everyone and everything to acknowledge my grief and my loss. In the day the neighbours' dogs still barked, and from my room I could hear people laughing and talking. I found it so hard to accept that they weren't sharing my grief. They did not know, or had heard and moved on. I could not move on. I felt rooted to the spot, tied to all the moments that had come before walking away from my precious baby.

I hid behind the tumble dryer one day when I saw a friend turn up with a card. She was a lovely lady, but I couldn't face seeing her and maybe having to answer a question about how I was. I didn't

know how I was. I didn't want to lie and say I was ok. I clearly wasn't. But neither did I want to say anything true, for fear that I would break down and be unable to control the tears again. I didn't want anyone to see how much it was hurting me because I didn't know if I was managing to hold to my resolve to give Ella for adoption. I walked away from her because I knew that all the reasons I had decided to give Joshua for adoption were valid and true, and I assumed that they applied to her too. I didn't know if adoption was the right decision for Ella's life. I had not thought about adoption as *her* future because I was so sure I was going to have Joshua.

Chapter Thirteen

I really struggled with the fact that I was facing this grief alone. Although my parents were with me and were so loving and supportive at this time, I was the only one who was Ella's parent. I didn't have her father to go cry with.

It had been hard enough going through the pregnancy alone, but this was so much harder. This was the rest of my life. It was very hard not to have someone whose heart was equally breaking over this situation. Maybe the hardest thing was to know that if I'd had a father for her I would have kept her.

During the first week without Ella I had some heartbreaking conversations.

The first was with my mum. She was helping me out of the bath and I was saying something about Ella. She said, "I would have liked to have had another cuddle with her." All I could do was cry over and over, "Why didn't you say? Why didn't you say?" Mum said she'd just wait to cuddle her in heaven. And that was me gone. I cried and cried and cried. We both did. Whatever differences of opinion we'd had over what to do, in this moment, the pain we shared was clear.

For my parents, it was the loss of their first grandchild. My dad broke down whilst leading a service (he was a Vicar) and my brother was given time off work. We should all have been united by this grief, yet I felt isolated because Ella was my baby, this was my decision, and we had all said hurtful words to each other about what to do. Now I had to walk in my decision even though I didn't think it was right for me. I was sure it could work for Ella.

That didn't make it right though, and when my Midwife came to visit me when Ella was six days old, I told her how I was feeling. This was the second conversation.

I remember hearing her car crossing the gravel outside. I was in bed, literally hiding under my duvet. I knew she was coming to see me but I couldn't get up. Mum had asked me if I wanted any breakfast a couple of hours before, but had then left me, to get on with the day.

When my Midwife entered the house I thought I ought to get up. I tried, but each time I got out of bed I felt physically sick from fear. I was afraid that telling her how I felt would have drastic consequences. If I decided to keep Ella I was afraid I'd be kicked out of the house and was afraid that I wouldn't cope with looking after her. I was also afraid of what the response might be to another changed decision.

So I got back into bed. Three times I tried to get up and go downstairs, but couldn't. After a while I feared my Midwife would leave and that I'd be left alone again with all my thoughts, so I made it across the landing and part way down the stairs. She met me and said she would have come up to me, which was so reassuring.

We sat and talked and I said that I wanted Ella back and couldn't be without her.

After this conversation came the one with my dad. I sat down at the kitchen table and said, "I want her back." My dad gave a disapproving sigh and said, "You want her back." I immediately felt afraid and intimidated so I said, "Well maybe I'm just feeling like this because she's not with me, and it's so soon after the birth, and..." I tailed off, because my excuses didn't fit in my head. They were not excuses. They were the truth. I *did* feel like that because she wasn't with me. I *did* feel like that because it was so soon after the birth.

The trouble was, no one in my family knew how much I had imagined Joshua – not just that I was having a baby boy – but that I had thought through *who* he was as well. I had mapped out his future as far as I could, praying for the couple who would adopt him even though I didn't know who they'd be.

I had tried to set up an adoptive couple before giving birth, so that Joshua could go straight from me to them in the hospital, and never have to live in foster care or spend time without a Mummy. I wanted this and asked for this, but Social Services said this was not allowed because of a birth mother's right to change her mind.

She has to have time to change her mind after her baby is born. Social Services evidently knew something I didn't understand, which several older women had said to me during my pregnancy. They said I wouldn't be able to make any decision until I held my baby in my arms. I thought there was some truth in that observation, but I had no idea how right they were.

For anyone who hasn't given birth and held their baby in their arms, they cannot understand this. You cannot know how it feels until you are in that situation. I do not know how to describe the feeling I had upon first seeing Ella. It did not matter that she wasn't Joshua. I loved her so completely for who she was. I loved her, and was amazed to see that this was the little person I had carried for all those months.

My feelings switched from thinking about Oyster to knowing and loving Ella; from thinking about Joshua and his welfare to caring for Ella, and her life. I think I wanted some more time just to process the thoughts I had about my baby; away from Joshua, and towards Ella.

So my dad disapproved of my changed mind. Without anyone there to say, "Mally's changed her mind", I faltered. My Social Worker was finding potential adoptive couples for Ella and things were underway.

I spoke to the Foster Mum the next day, when Ella was one week old. Towards the end of our conversation Ella woke up and I could hear her crying in the background. Without knowing whether or not the Foster Mum had any other babies, I knew that cry. That was my daughter. The Foster Mum said, "Do you want to say hello to Mummy?" and Ella's wail filled the telephone. Again I thought it was a bit odd to refer to me as Mummy, but then, I was her mummy, and she didn't have another one yet. I spoke of her as my daughter, so why shouldn't I be called Mummy?

After the phone call I stood in the study with flowers warming in one hand – Mum had brought them in from the garden while I was on the phone – and my address book in the other. Tears streamed down my face and milk leaked from my breasts. I did not know what to do with myself. I might not have had a home for my baby but I had love, milk and warmth.

After the conversation with my dad about getting her back I didn't voice my wishes again. I tried to deal with it all in my head, telling myself that this was normal behaviour for someone who had just been pregnant, given birth, and most importantly, parted with their baby.

I knew I had a bit of time while my Social Worker assessed couples, so I tried to honestly evaluate the situation for everyone involved. My reasons for giving my baby for adoption had been that it would have two parents, and that I would be free from a responsibility I didn't want. Now that I had had Ella, however, this reasoning made no sense.

I did want the responsibility of looking after her, and I didn't want her to have two parents; I wanted her to have me!

Chapter Fourteen

When Ella was just over two weeks old I went away to a Christian retreat centre. It was wonderful to have space and time by myself. I went for four days and had space just to think and pray alone. I came across a poem by Christina Rossetti called *Baby Lies So Fast Asleep* which expressed exactly how I felt. I felt as though Ella were dead as she was lost to me. I wrote some thoughts and words down myself:

So I lie down again with my loneliness.

Raindrops drumming out the pattern of her name.

Grief slices through my vision

blurring like the rain

Shards of memory

the saddest and happiest days of my life.

Intense joy and deep deep sorrow.

I had to be broken to be open to receive

Without emptiness there is no need to fill.

The autumn rainbow of colours

the promise of peace.

Grief like the sea.

Ebbing, flowing, retreating for a while

only to return.

Breakers crashing, I am deafened by the roar

there is no silence. No peace.

Ceaseless. No rest. An ever-present reminder of

what I do not wish to forget;

only wish to heal.

And there is the promise of peace.

And so this is hope.

Later that day I wrote:

*He does not take away my pain
but binds the hurt with peace.*

It was as though I would not allow myself to truly grieve, openly and without solutions, in case it resulted in wanting my baby back. I had already expressed my desire to have her back when she was a week old, but this had been snubbed. I was terrified lest I should want her back now and be denied her. I tried to keep a lid on my feelings which only caused me more pain.

My Social Worker eventually found a potential adoptive couple. She told me about them, and how they were both practising Christians. This was the most important criteria for me, because if I'd had a Christian father for my baby I would never have considered adoption in the first place.

My pregnancy Counsellor was praying that God would give me a sign if this couple was the right one. He did. The couple had had a son who had died and his name was Joshua.

Karen was amazed. This was confirmation beyond what she'd hoped for, but I understood this information in a different way. To me, God was saying, "Joshua has lived. This is Ella. She's your daughter."

I am still amazed by God. I prayed for Joshua. I saw Joshua in my mind. I loved him and wanted him. But he had already lived. This couple had prayed for a child to adopt. They had pictured a baby in their minds. They had loved and wanted this baby. But she was for me. We have prayed for each other's children, and held their lives before God openly. He has given us each our own child and I find that amazing.

The mystery to me is that, had I had Joshua, I would have given him to them; but they had already had him.

* * * *

When my Social Worker told me about the potential adoptive couple I asked, "How long are we looking at?" She said, "Three weeks." I wanted to know how soon I would have to make my final decision and sign Ella away from me forever. I had not signed anything, so Ella was still legally my child.

Knowing the short time frame, I suddenly felt sure I was not ready to do this, and this certainty gave me the boldness to say what I did want to do. I said to my mum, "I need to go and see Ella, to know if I'm making the right decision."

She said, "I think you're being selfish." I thought, "that's as may be, but I need to know for myself." I didn't want to live my life in regret.

The situation had suddenly become real, because other real people were now involved. I knew my

Social Worker, Midwife, Doctor and other people in official roles from when I was pregnant. The adoptive couple had been external to my sphere of knowledge and understanding to this point, yet now they were very real and very important. They were the trigger factor for me.

I felt as if I'd been woken from a coma. I had clarity of thought for the first time since I got pregnant. I knew I had to see Ella whatever the outcome of that meeting would be. I was no longer afraid of what I might or might not cope with. Now that I had almost lost her forever I was spurred on to choose her forever, or give her in complete peace.

Chapter Fifteen

I had a list of questions and ideas I wanted to clarify with the adoptive couple through my Social Worker. She had only told me about this particular couple twice in the space of one week, and even though there was the phenomenal Joshua connection, I did not feel comfortable. Here was the perfect adoptive couple, but something in my spirit said NO. I wouldn't give a cat to people I had only heard of twice and not met, let alone my most treasured possession – my own baby.

I wrote my fears and questions down:

Can I meet them more than once before Ella goes to them – want time to think it through and process info and also think if I have any other questions etc.

Would I be allowed to see a photo of Joshua?

Will they ever want to adopt more children?

Can I meet them before they meet Ella – then if I can't do it, they don't have so much heartbreak.

Will I be allowed a photo of them? (They have mine)

Will I be allowed to know their names and surname?-want to know how Ella's name goes with theirs. – will they keep Ella's names or will they change them?

A few days later, I wrote down more concerns:

They would tell me if she was very ill or died? And likewise if either of them were ever very ill or died?

Tell them about Ella's names and the tape where Great-Grandma Ella prayed into all the future generations of the family.

Tell them I would very much like to meet Ella when she is older, if she wants to meet me.

Can they pray for me as I pray for them? Maybe we could set aside a day of the month to pray for each other? And can I have a hug?

What I would have called Ella if she'd been a boy – tell them. Did their son have a middle name?

Please can they have a service of dedication for Ella, and let me know when it is so I can light a candle for her at that time.

Tell them about the significance of my ring and the celebration we had.

Postcard I sent [to Ella at the Foster Mum's house] – I signed it Mummy. I hope they'll understand. I'll also be writing a letter and making a tape and giving the shoes and Bible. Will they let me sign my letter to her 'Mummy'?

How my name is pronounced. That I called her Oyster, and why.

Letter box contact – how often?

Can I see Ella before she is given to them? Is that a good idea?-seems so soon and I don't feel

ready.

Maybe I could receive her from [the Foster Mum] and give her to them?

I don't know; these are just suggestions but I don't want to rule out the possibility of seeing her once more before giving my little Ella to her new parents.

Do they want a photo of me with Ella?

I'm still trying to find a photo of just me, not pregnant, where I look nice.

I will hunt out little me photos so they have an idea of how I looked.

Are any of their wider family Christians?

Will they sing to Ella or let her hear my singing tape that I'm making for her?

When each year will we exchange info and pics?

Do they want info from me each year? Will they give her cards from me there and then, or altogether when she's older? How much older? -18, or when she asks, if earlier? Can I send postcards, or can I only send stuff once a year? Can we get in touch at Christmas / Easter or some other appointed time as well?

Please bring her up to know and love the Lord Jesus. Please may I know if and therefore when she makes a personal commitment to the Lord?

PLEASE TELL HER I LOVE HER. SO MUCH.

Knowing I was thinking about visiting Ella, my dad wrote to me. He said:

My Dear Mally,

Know yourself held in the hand of God. Trust in his strength which has been so amply shown in so much of what has happened so far – in the tremendous support of family (especially your dear bro) – the Grandmas, Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, all the support of village, churches and community – don't think it was all accident!

Held in the hands of God you had wonderful support in pregnancy, in agonising over decisions, in the wonderful birth of Ella and in the perinatal care. And in such a lovely healthy baby.

Do you now question trusting him? Are you not sure if He has guided your mind, heart, soul – along with countless others? Your decision, reached with such care and love, enabling you to consider all possibilities very openly – that decision and the care, love, sacrifice and selflessness with which you made it – wasn't it the one God gave you? Your decision won the admiration of believers and non-believers alike: that decision if challenged permanently now would seem to deny the unmistakeable truth of the strength of God holding you. It would seem to show a wavering faith in His Allmightyness. Your divinely enabled selflessness would like to be weakening – bordering on the selfish.

All the time you have said you want the best for Ella. You're now on the brink of giving her to (how amazing!) what seem like the best possible parents who will love and care for her within God's Allmighty providence. You're on the brink and it's human and natural of course to have doubts, questionings, but this is what faith is all about, isn't it? – Standing on the edge and daring to go, knowing that God will hold you and Ella and the adoptive couple (and all the people who've supported you, given time to you, prayed for you, loved you).

My dearest Mally, remember my sermon seagull fledglings. They can't have a trial run: they just have to go for it – and then they find the amazing fullness of all that is in them to be – which they could never before have believed possible.

We love you very much and hold you in our prayers.

And we stand by you, whatever.

May God bless you even bigger!

The peace of God which passes all understanding ...

Much love – yer ole Dad. Xxxx

At the same time, Jan invited me to stay in Cardiff. This was a God-send. I desperately needed some space away from my parents.

While I was with Jan and Andy I caught a train to visit Ella. While I gave her a bottle of milk the Foster Mum and my Social Worker tactfully went to the kitchen to make coffee.

I held Ella in my arms, and she smiled at me! She was six and a half weeks old. By that stage she had only been smiling at the Foster Mum, because she knew her, but she smiled at me! It wasn't wind, or the easing face she'd make before a wee. This was a real smile that lit up her eyes.

I had been so afraid she might cry, not recognising me, but she obviously knew my face. She recognised my voice and my smell, and to be smiled at by her was pure delight. If I had decided to go through with the adoption, this moment would have been mine to treasure forever, and would have helped make it bearable.

I had prayed to go with an open mind to see Ella on this occasion. I wanted to make my decision rationally because my emotions were all over the place.

As I held Ella and looked at her I thought, "This could go either way. You're safe, you're warm, you're loved. You have everything you need. You'd be okay without me. But I won't be okay without you."

Chapter Sixteen

For the first time, I allowed myself to think about what our separation would mean for me. It was amazing how easy it was to be clear-thinking that morning.

After we had left my Social Worker asked me what I had decided. I said, "I'm having her back!" She was overjoyed!

When I spoke to the Foster Mum she said, "I knew you'd come back for her." I asked her how she knew, having been unable to see that myself. She said, "I've been doing this for fifteen years. You just know which mums will come back." I remember wishing I'd been able to tell!

The next week was a bit of a blur; I wanted to pick Ella up only a couple of days later, but she got a heavy cold so the Foster Mum arranged for me to pick her up the following week. I was really disappointed, but threw myself into preparing everything for Ella's arrival. Friends gave me everything I needed for her, and Jan and Andy said we could live with them for the time being, as I had no home.

Having decided to have Ella back, I had to tell my parents. When I phoned my mum and told her she said, "Well I can't say I'm glad, because I'm not."

As you can imagine, this really hurt. I think for her, and for many people, the thought of more change was too much to cope with. My dad had spoken angrily on the phone to me the night before I went to see Ella. He'd had a heart tremor, and told me, "Your vacillating around a decision is causing a lot of people a lot of stress."

So things were not easy in the family. I went to see my parents for the weekend, and prayed that they wouldn't prevent me from returning to Cardiff, as I feared they might try and stop me getting Ella back. But they didn't. It was a tense weekend, but I felt it necessary to go and spend time with them for the last time as just Mally.

* * * *

The day came: Fiona and Jan drove me to the Foster Mum's house and I collected Ella!

I asked the Foster Mum if she'd been able to take photos of Ella as I had asked. She said she had, but she was really upset because when she'd had the film developed it had come back as a whole roll of blanks.

I was really upset because to me, the time I'd had without Ella was forever lost, and I had no record of what she had looked like. She did look very different now from when I'd given her to the Foster Mum, at 42.5 hours old. However, Jan pointed out to me that it was as if God was saying that that time did not matter; she had been cared for, and now she was back with me. She said it was as if He was saying there is no record of her ever being with anyone but you.

I can see that now, that this was another miracle, and that I have not missed any images of baby Ella, but it was very difficult to understand at the time.

I knew I'd had all those weeks without her, and while it might not have mattered to others, it certainly mattered to me. Those weeks had been necessary to bring me to the point of getting Ella back. To say there was no record of that time in her life at that point was not comforting. I wanted the recognition of what I had been through.

* * * *

On the way back to Cardiff we stopped at a supermarket. I carried Ella in the car seat I'd been given which weighed a tonne! Jan showed me how to change her nappy, and then we sat down to have some food. Two older ladies came and gushed over Ella, which was an odd experience for me.

To me, she was newborn. I did not know how to look after her, yet to everyone else the assumption was that I'd always been with her. I was very proud of her, but found it odd to pretend I knew everything about this baby. Although the Foster Mum had told me her routine and made sure I was going to use the same washing powder and so on, I had no idea really of the person of this little baby. I didn't know what to expect, and she continually delighted and surprised me!

Back in Cardiff, I got used to the reality of being her mum. I was exhausted after the first couple of nights where Ella didn't sleep through as long as usual.

I learned how to make up her bottles, and failed dismally at keeping on top of the washing. Jan and Andy were great in helping me to find my feet, and taking over when I hadn't finished my tea. This was a bit of a standing joke, but I've never been a quick eater and couldn't gobble faster just because I had Ella. This was one of the many knacks I had to learn.

When I'd had Ella four days, I went into Cardiff. I met up with one of my friends and went for coffee, revelling in the steering power of the pushchair I'd bought.

Afterwards, waiting for the train back out to Jan and Andy's, I needed to give Ella a bottle. I had a carton of her milk ready, and poured it into her bottle, but I had no way of warming it up.

The train was already delayed and Ella was getting hungry. I prayed, and asked God for a miracle, knowing that it would take us half an hour to get home, which was far too long for a hungry baby. As I prayed, I felt the bottle grow warm in my hands. This was the last day of November and the wind was bitter. My hands were very cold and my finger nails were turning purple. I had no gloves and the warmth in the bottle was not from me! As I gave Ella the bottle I could feel it was the exact temperature of the one I'd prepared for her earlier that morning at home. I was amazed and sat on the train (it came only a minute later) praying silent thanks to God.

When I shared the story with Fiona later on she pointed out that I already knew what temperature Ella's milk should be, where only a few days before I'd been wondering if I'd ever learn.

So, we settled into our routine and I invited my parents to come and visit. My dad couldn't take the time off work, but Mum came up for the day. The morning passed like sitting in a funeral parlour. The atmosphere was so gloomy and sad that Jan made an excuse to leave the house. My mum looked ready to burst into tears at any moment and I felt awkward. Ella was a star, but even her loveliness didn't lift the mood.

To top things off, Mum hadn't come as soon as I'd invited. My aunt and cousin were the first family visitors (my brother also couldn't get time off work), and we had a wonderful day together. We took lots of photos – my cousin got the first photo of Ella smiling – and we celebrated her life.

Over the next few weeks we had a steady stream of visitors. I got involved in the church I'd been part of before Ella's birth. It was not easy to see some people who'd made their thoughts and feelings clear at the time of my pregnancy, but many people were loving and supportive. I became a part of the group of mums who'd provided all the baby clothes and equipment we'd needed, and things picked up quite a lot. I didn't have much time to think about the time I hadn't had with Ella because I was so busy looking after her.

Chapter Seventeen

While we were still living at Jan and Andy's my parents sent me their Christmas letter. They'd sent it to about 100 friends and family, many of whom I did not know and with whom I would not have shared the intimate details of my life. Instead of asking me what I was happy with them sharing, they blurted out all the details of my life that year. On the top of my copy my dad wrote:

Dear Mally, (Just so you know what we've said!!)

Most people would assume that I had given my assent to these cruel words. The extracts referring to me went thus:

Change and challenge have characterised 2003.

The most far-reaching challenge began when Mally told us, in mid-March, that she was expecting a baby, disowned by the father. She contemplated the prospect of being a single student parent or giving the little one for adoption at birth so as to provide a two-parent upbringing from the outset.

Mally [in July/August] was keeping very fit, but still agonising over the adoption question. It was a very testing time for all of us. Throughout, we've been very conscious that we have been wonderfully held in love and prayer by family and friends and our parishioners here. Then, in late August Mally told us that she had reached a peaceful state of heart and mind and was resolved to give her baby for adoption. So the weight was lifted. Mally needed, understandably, a lot of support as she prepared for the birth and subsequent adoption.

Ella Kathleen was born at 11:29 pm on 4th October and two days later went to her Foster-mother. A Christian couple was found to adopt Ella, but as the time of final handover approached, Mally decided to receive Ella back into her own care. So from November 26th Mally has been caring for her daughter within the context of a friend's family in Cardiff. From that base she hopes to find suitable accommodation so that she can resume her studies at Cardiff University in January 2004. They will be home for Christmas.

In this eventful year, family has occupied much of our time and there has been an inescapable dark undercurrent of concern and anxiety. Yet there have also been many stimulating experiences and causes for joy.

In the list of 'stimulating experiences and causes for joy' there is no reference to Ella's birth.

Other people were far more enthusiastic about Ella's arrival!

My cousin wrote in mid-December:

Hi Mally,

I wanted to say how pleased and excited I was to hear about you deciding to keep your beautiful baby. I know that the years ahead will probably be incredibly challenging, but I hope they'll also be very happy. I'm sure with your love and determination, plus support from family and friends, everything will work out fine.

At Christmas time Sylvia wrote:

Dear Maddi

I hope this letter finds you in the best of health. Your news is the best news we could have had for Christmas. We realise it is not easy for you, and there will be many times where you have to juggle everything around to make time for everything, but the love and joy you will get from Ella as she grows up will make it all worth while. Give her a big kiss from us all, the same as we send you love and hugs. We think about you often and hope this Christmas is the best you all have had.

God bless. Take care.

All our love.

Another dearly loved family friend wrote:

Dear Madeleine

I am so glad that you took the decision to keep your baby; she will have such a loving understanding mother, and you will have the greatest joy and blessing of your own precious baby.

I know it will not be easy, but you are a sensible, resourceful person, and your deep faith will guide you in the difficult times.

God be with you always.

Faye, my childhood best friend wrote again, saying:

Dear Madeleine,

Thank you for the newsletter! I'm so pleased that you and Ella are back together.

All of my family and I are always thinking of you, you are very special to us all and always have been!

Take care, lots and lots of love.

At Christmas I received a beautiful silver bracelet with elephants on it, from a couple who had been supportive during my pregnancy. This message was attached:

To Mally

Elephants are both strong and brave – and that is what we both feel you are – Happy Christmas and blessings.

Another couple wrote:

May this Christmas bring you immeasurable happiness as you delight in Ella.

Another friend wrote:

Mally I'm glad you didn't give your little one away, it will be hard going, but in the end you will see you did the right thing and God will bless you.

All my love to you and the little one.

Once I had Ella back and was organising Day Care for Ella, in order to return to Uni after the holidays, my dad wrote to me again. It seemed as if he wanted to break the bonds between Ella and me, rather than build them up. He wrote:

Will you, when you return to Cardiff, after Christmas, leave Ella in University crèche before you re-start your course, so that you can both get used to the idea before you resume your studies in earnest? Would also give you a bit of time to read before lectures begin.

I didn't put her in early, spending as much time as possible with her before I had to go to lectures. He wrote this letter to me when I had only had Ella back for 11 days. It was as if he was challenging my decision yet again.

Earlier in the letter he laid claim to her in a way that I might have expected had they been supportive of me keeping my baby. He wrote:

I love you lots and hope you're enjoying being a loving Mummy to your dear Ella (our dear Ella, now that we're living grandparents, so to speak.)

It was as if he'd forgotten all the hurtful things he'd said less than a month before, and was now the world's champion granddad.

Chapter Eighteen

At Christmas time we went and stayed with my parents. On the first evening, Ella cried for her bottle. I was so anxious to show that I knew how to look after my baby, and that I had made the right decision that I rushed with her bottle. My dad was holding her, and in my enthusiasm I sprayed milk over his trouser leg as I got the bottle to her mouth.

My mum commented on my stretch marks one evening as I stood on the landing holding Ella. She told me to wear something longer to 'cover that unsightly skin'. I remember being really upset, because I didn't have any fitting clothes. I hadn't worked on my exercises after having Ella because my abdominal muscles were so far apart and my back so sore that the Doctor told me not to attempt them until the muscles had come back together.

Somehow we survived the holidays and Ella starred as baby Jesus in the Christmas Eve Nativity service at church. It was lovely to celebrate Christmas with her, having felt a huge emptiness inside on seeing the baby merchandise filling up the shop windows in the weeks after her birth, knowing that I wouldn't be buying anything for her. We shared a special day when my mum's side of the family came to celebrate Christmas at the end of December. I was so proud to show her off and everyone wanted to give her cuddles. I have a photo of the four generations: my Grandmother, Mum, me, Ella, sitting on the sofa and Mum's actually smiling.

There is another photo with my mum holding Ella, taking her to look at the Christmas tree, and it's so special. It took a long time for Mum to be happy with my decision, and for over a year I tore off every part of a letter where she sent her love to Ella, as proof that she did love her. She does, and she did, but it took a long time for her to adjust her thoughts and expectations. I didn't have time to adjust; I just had to throw myself into being Mummy.

In the new year my Godmother wrote to me again, saying:

My dear Madeleine,

I gather from various sources that you decided in the end to bring up your daughter yourself. I can quite understand your decision and now you'll never have to wonder what she's doing, what she's like and whether she'll ever want to discover her true roots. I guess things won't be easy for you but I'm sure that you will, with the Lord's help and the support system you've obviously established, do a wonderful job (if one can call it that!) and Ella will be nurtured with much love.

I also received a card from one of the ladies on the Adoption Option video with whom I'd been in touch during my pregnancy. She was so helpful and kind to talk to, and encouraged me with the Joshua 1:9 verse. In January 2004 she wrote:

Dear Madeleine,

I hope this reaches you safely. I couldn't tell from your texts whether you had decided to take the baby to college with you or whether you had decided to let your mum and dad care for her for the year as you had suggested a while ago. So I hope if she isn't with you in Cardiff you will be able to get the gift to her.

I wanted to get a little something to say congratulations on the birth of Ella your beautiful

daughter. You always struck me as a girl with a lot of courage and spirit so I felt sure that whatever you decided would be the right thing and that you would have strong inner resources to fall back on when times are hard.

Adoption is hard, parenting is hard but you have the immense blessing of knowing how lost you felt without her and how much you loved her and wanted her with you. When times are hard you will be able to remember that you took the path that seemed right for you both and so whatever life throws at you you will know it was the only real choice for you!

I'm so glad you kept the baby in the end. I felt all along that you would be given a girl that would be a friend to you as well as a daughter. I also felt that you would keep the baby and this would be good for you. Obviously I couldn't share this at the time as it would have influenced your decision.

Remember you still need God in your life, be zealous in the ways of God, not lukewarm. See Ella as an opportunity to love and teach God's truths to. You are a very special young woman. "Be brave and very courageous" as you seek to balance being a good single mum with trying to finish your degree and then possibly work. Know that God walked through all this with you and it is He who caused you to bring Ella back. He has a plan and a purpose for you both. Good things and not evil. If you will look to Him for everything and build a real and vibrant relationship with Him. It's so much more than just Sunday.

All the best for you both. Lots of love.

Chapter Nineteen

After the holidays Ella and I moved back to Cardiff, into a one bed flat owned by the University. This was another miracle.

I was half way through my degree and had been on leave of absence. I had phoned, whilst living at Jan and Andy's, about the possibility of University accommodation. I was told there was only one flat left, and that a gentleman was very interested in it. This was on a Friday, and he was due to look at it the following Monday. I was told if he didn't want it, I could have it. The lady I spoke to said, "Don't get your hopes up, love; he really wants it." Well, there's nothing like a challenge to motivate me to pray! So lots of friends and I prayed, until I had a phone call on the Monday from the now bemused lady. She said, "He doesn't want the flat. I can't understand it. But if you want it, it's yours." I looked around the flat and said "Yes please!"

Moving into our flat was the first time Ella and I had been alone together. This was very important to me, because I finally felt I was not having to share her with anyone or feel as though others owned her.

However, as an extrovert I needed to spend time with other people. I found it extremely difficult living in the flat with just Ella and my feelings for company. Now we had space, the feelings I had not had time for before came flooding in.

Ella was going to Day Care when I was in Uni and I missed her like crazy. For the first few weeks I found it really hard to leave her in Day Care, because it felt like giving her to the Foster Mum all over again. It felt like leaving her.

Once I got out of Day Care I was okay, because I had lectures to go to so I had to run to get there on time. Often when I had free time I would pick Ella up early, just so we could spend time together. The lady who ran Day Care said to me that she'd never seen a mum and baby who did so much for each other as Ella and I did. Our relationship displayed mutual fulfilment and love in a way that nobody else's did, and just knowing this was special to me. I am grateful for all the love and help Day Care gave to Ella and to me, but I did find it hard at the time to leave her with anyone else. I didn't want to miss the 'firsts' that happened there. I wanted her to do her first roll over with me.

Likewise, at church, I found it very hard to let other people pick Ella up and cuddle her, because I wanted time with her exclusively. I'd have spent a week in Uni without her, so I wanted to spend every possible moment with her at the weekend. If Ella was resting I wanted people to give her space, but as people do with babies, friends wanted to pick her up and play with her. I have lots of photos of her with different friends, but I have very few photos of her with me because there was no one to take them.

The loneliness of living in our flat quite a distance from most of our friends began to eat at me.

Whenever we were home I was busy looking after Ella, but when she'd gone to bed I had time on my hands and couldn't concentrate on anything. I had work to do for Uni, but was generally too tired to do it at night, so I studied during the day between lectures.

I struggled mightily with my feelings over Ella's birth and my decisions. I had lost an irreplaceable chunk of her life, and I was consumed by guilt. I felt incapable of ever making up for that time, which is what people spoke about. Friends assured me that "you're making up for that time now", but this was cold comfort. Others said, "Ooh, you must feel so guilty", and this of course made me feel awful. Until that point it had not occurred to me to label my feelings as guilt.

I knew as I still know now that I can never 'make up' for that time without Ella. While I no longer feel guilty about that time or about my decisions, the change in my feelings and mind has taken years to come about. It has taken me four and a half years to finally let go of the burden of guilt I carried. Why? Because I think I am starting to understand and recognise the feeling for what it was.

I felt guilty for feeling condemned over my decisions, when I knew that 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'. I felt guilty for getting pregnant in the first place, guilty for considering abortion, guilty for considering adoption once I'd decided to have the baby, guilty for giving Ella to the Foster Mum when she wasn't Joshua and this plan was not for her, and guilty for having her back because she wouldn't complete this other family. Then I felt guilty for the time we'd been apart. The more I tried to make up for that lost time the harder it became. I could not turn back the clock and change the decisions I'd made or what had happened. I could only make the most of the present and the future I believed God was bringing us into, as He'd promised in Jeremiah 29:11.

In feeling the pain of the past I was losing the joy of the present. I found it so hard to enjoy Ella because that seemed somehow to deny the pain of not having her. I was longing for a space to deal with her loss, before coming to terms with her restoration to me.

The thoughts that churned around my head at this time were very hard to deal with. I had been promised 'post-adoptive care' when I was pregnant and planning for adoption, but because I had not gone through completely with the adoption I was given no support. I was dropped by Social Services because I no longer formed a case load. I can understand this from their administrative perspective, but it was disastrous for me.

They did not know that to my mind, I *had* given her up and 'gone through with it', because I gave her to the Foster Mum not thinking for one moment that I would ever see her again.

I had no idea how to combat the feelings of guilt and loss that assailed me and would not leave me alone. Many people could not understand this and said, "But you have her back. Get over it." Suffice it to say, unless you go through pain and loss like this you probably will never understand the feelings I had night and day. It won't make sense to anyone who has not had to confront such feelings, but it does not need to make sense to anyone to be true.

The loneliness deepened. I am not sure how long it took me to see the Doctor and be diagnosed with Post Natal Depression (PND), as everything at that time is rather blurred.

I know the Health Visitor came to see me and was concerned about me so she referred me to the Doctor. The Doctor was lovely, and helped me to talk about how I felt without making me feel guilty for expressing my pain.

I found it increasingly difficult to tell anyone how I was struggling to cope with Ella, my feelings, University, and life generally. This was because she was such a beautiful, happy baby, and was very easy going. She didn't mind being passed around to different people and would smile and gurgle at them. They would then say, "Can you imagine if you'd given her up? How could you have thought of it! She's so gorgeous!" and I would come crashing down.

I felt so angry at people's stupid comments. They clearly had no idea why I'd considered adoption, or that it had hurt me more than they could possibly imagine to give Ella to the Foster Mum.

Other people's delight in my baby caused me so much pain. They loved her because of who she was, yet had I given her for adoption they would never have known her. They loved her because they saw how engaging she was, yet they would not have known this had I had a termination.

Their admiration cost me a lot. I felt guilty when they spoke like this, because the accusation was

that they would never have seen or known this lovely baby, had I gone through with what *I* thought was right. And my thought was often, “But this was not for you! This is not your baby! This is my baby, and every decision I made was made with her best interests at heart.”

I felt guilty for deciding to have Ella back because people were shocked that I could ever have parted with anything so beautiful. If she had been ugly would they have reacted the same way? No one seemed to understand that it had cost me everything to part with her, and I was still trying to come to terms with that myself, never mind try and answer anybody else's questions and reproachful looks.

Most damaging, though, was when friends picked up Ella and said to her, “How could Mummy have given you up? Hey? How could anyone give away you? Aren't you gorgeous? Yes, you are!”

In the middle of all this I remembered the vision my brother had shared during my pregnancy of the land flowing with milk and honey. I asked God where this wonderful land was that He had promised.

For the first year of Ella's life, although I eventually got my laugh back, things were bleak. I felt so dry and empty having given out all that I had to nurture my Oyster.

Having Ella back was wonderful but it was so painful because of all the emotional upheaval I'd been through. I guess because she was so happy and loved me unconditionally it was harder. I found it difficult to enjoy happy times with her because I felt as though I was stabbing myself in the back; as though my enjoyment of her life didn't recognise what I'd been through and as if I was somehow denying the cost to me of her life. It was not that I didn't want her; I wanted her more than anything. It was that it had cost me so much internally to give her and then to completely change my mind and have her back, and externally it looked as if we had a normal loving relationship.

Yet there was something missing. I wanted in myself to be able to hold my baby and enjoy her chuckles and her baby cuddles without feeling a tearing inside over the time we had missed.

Chapter Twenty

The antidepressants I was prescribed gave me nightmares so they were changed twice. They helped neutralise my feelings, but then everything became bland. I couldn't laugh or smile, except at Ella, because I didn't find anything to laugh or smile about.

We were alone. No number of visits or trips dispelled the loneliness of trying to go to sleep in our room with the thoughts that could no longer be silenced by the day's demands.

I was very angry, but this never surfaced during the day when I might expect to be with people. At night however, if I was getting Ella off to sleep and she was crying, the pent-up feelings burst the dam in my head and came flooding out. I would lean against the chest of drawers in our room, not daring to go and pick Ella up because I felt a huge urge to pick her up and throw her against the wall to stop her screaming.

I know that God was holding me back, because I couldn't speak, but in my head the thought "No, don't let me do it" fought against the thought "Pick her up and throw her against the wall". God used what I had been through to hold me back from destruction. I knew I had to protect Ella; I knew the cost of having her as mine, and I did not want her to be parted from me again.

My Health Visitor came to see me and I broke down. I was so afraid of telling her how I really felt, because I was afraid that Social Services would take Ella off me and I'd be left with nothing and no reason to live, having failed my baby girl whom I loved so deeply.

I found it hard to understand how I could feel such conflicting emotions at the same time. I would feel confused, and then suddenly clear, which really frightened me. I knew I needed help so I told my Health Visitor about the thoughts I couldn't handle. She was very concerned, and very loving. She didn't tell me I was a bad mother or scream at me. She was very gentle and told me what she was going to do. She made sure that I wouldn't be left alone, and got me an appointment with my Doctor straight away.

The Doctor, again, was lovely. They asked me lots of questions, but not too quickly, because I found the process of thinking through anything really exhausting. Mainly I was sad. I didn't know it was possible to feel so sad and full of pain and yet still be alive.

This was the other part of how I felt; I wanted to die. More than that, I wanted to kill myself, because I felt sure God wouldn't let me die. He hadn't let my baby die when I was pregnant, despite me begging Him to spare it and me from the situation and decisions we were up against.

I had a certainty, in the midst of all the mental fog I was in, that God had a plan and that He was going to bring us through this. The awful thing was that I couldn't see how to carry on living until that point when life might be bearable again. I couldn't imagine ever feeling okay again. I didn't know how to stop crying. I knew I loved my daughter, but felt I was failing her desperately. I wanted to be given the chance to love her and raise her and enjoy her but I also wanted to die.

So I planned out my end. Time and again I was in the place to do it, to jump from my chosen bridge and end everything. Time and again I could not do it, because Ella was with me.

I knew that if I jumped she would be found in her pushchair, and taken back into care with Social Services. Worse still, she might be found by someone who would harm her. I could not jump because I could not leave her. I remembered what I had whispered to her when she was a tiny foetus: "It's okay. Mummy loves you." I remembered what I had prayed to God when I changed

my mind against abortion: "Thank You for the privilege of carrying this little life." I could not give up on Ella, having come this far.

When my Health Visitor and Doctor found out about my suicide plans, they sent me straight to Whitchurch Hospital, which specialises in mental health.

Jan came with me as I didn't want to go alone. Ella was being cute and bubbly as usual which detracted from me being taken seriously. The Doctor there, after ascertaining that I didn't hear actual voices in my head telling me to do things, appeared to think that there was not much wrong with me. She just saw a mum and daughter in matching clothes (so they must be looking after themselves) with a loving friend (so they can't be all alone). Maybe this was a good thing. She asked me if I thought that staying in hospital for a few days might help, but she hadn't mentioned what would happen to Ella. So I said no. I didn't want there to be a nasty surprise of "Your daughter must go into care, as you can't look after her".

In everything, God used Ella's life to save mine. He used the determination not to lose any more time with her to keep me going. The church prayer group were asked to pray for an unnamed individual who wanted to take their own life, and the thoughts of ending it all stopped filling my head. I stopped planning to jump and decided I wouldn't. I asked God to help me enjoy Ella, and I stopped wanting to throw her against the wall.

Chapter Twenty-One

For months following all that had happened with Ella I had nothing to say.

Every time I had to produce a piece of creative writing for my degree I either cried or wrote rubbish. It felt as though I was trying to force a stream out of a cracked and hardened river bed. Nothing made any sense anyway, and the more I tried to piece words together, the harder it became. I could not write a single line devoid of emotion, yet that was what I wanted to do.

If only I could have stopped feeling it all for a moment, in my head, in my heart, behind my eyes, at my throat. It was horrible feeling that I was constantly being strangled by a grief I had brought about. I kept tugging at the collar of my clothes because I actually felt tightness around my neck. Finding no one else to blame for my feelings but me only made things worse. I cried and screamed, but it all came back to me and the decisions I had made.

Whilst everyone wanted to have a say in what I should do with my baby before it was born, no one wanted to have anything to do with the consequences of such advice.

I knew everything was up to me, but I still wanted to ask, “Did you know I’d feel like this? Would you have bludgeoned me with your opinion if you had seen what I am going through now?”

Through everything I have been a single woman making decisions about my own life, and then a single mother making decisions about my family life. No one else has been the least bit responsible for this, as was only too evident after I was left alone to deal with my emotions.

Maybe that’s what should have happened in the first place; if I’d been left to deal with my emotions, no doubt I would never have made such a stupid and painful decision as to give my own child away for adoption. Of course, it was not stupid at the time, and had I gone through with it, my pain would have brought huge blessing to another family. But Ella is my daughter, my family, and with me is where she belongs.

* * * *

I remember my mum commenting how pleased she was that I was thinking about someone other than myself for the first time since Ella when a friend miscarried the following spring. I had cried, sharing the news with my parents, because I didn’t know what to say to my friend.

All I had to offer was tears. As at other times of grief this was all my friend wanted.

I remember being stung by my mum's words because they seemed so uncomprehending. Didn't she see that I could come alongside my friend in pain because we were both hurting? Didn't she understand that this was the first person who wasn't alien to my feelings of grief? Did she not see that that was what I needed in my situation: someone to sit and weep with me?

I know Mum said, "I think you're being selfish" when I said I was having Ella back; this conversation showed the sentiment had carried on. I wondered how easy she thought it was to go through such pain and loss, followed by a complete reversal of emotions and plans.

Just because I had Ella back didn't mean the pain had gone. I still had all the confusing cocktail of emotions to deal with, without space to process them, as I was now looking after my baby too. I felt guilty for feeling so sad when I had my precious baby back, especially when people told me to get over it and focus on the present.

However wonderful that would be, I felt it was not possible unless the pain and loss was being dealt with. To help me deal with the pain, I started meeting up with my Pastor's wife, and talking and praying through the issues I was struggling with. I also went to a trained Counsellor. I found it hard, however, to sit and talk to this lady just for two hours once a week. She expected me to dredge everything up and then still leave in a reasonable state.

A part of dealing with the loss is writing about it now. Writing it recognises that it did happen. Writing it allows me to face it, with tears a lot of the time, and assign it a place in my past. It doesn't make light of what happened, but it doesn't dwell on it to the extent that I cannot move on with my life now. Writing about it helps me to process the thoughts and feelings connected to it all and leave it for the most part in a place I don't visit so much anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When I was pregnant and trying to decide between keeping my baby and giving it for adoption I kept being reminded of the Bible stories of Abraham and Isaac, and Moses. It seemed that wherever I went, God was determined to remind me of these stories and their heroes. It was difficult to know what He was trying to tell me. In both stories there was the giving of a child, and a change in circumstances following that surrender.

In the case of Moses, his mother had to give him away to save his life. However, she also got him back and weaned him. Then she had to give him again and he was adopted into Pharaoh's family. As an adult he shunned his adoptive family and was reunited with his birth family and God's people.

When people gave me this story I wondered what God was trying to tell me. I wondered if He was actually allowing me to choose between adoption and keeping my baby. Either way I took comfort in the fact that I was not the first woman who had to give away their dearly loved baby in order to save its life.

In the case of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham was asked to sacrifice his only son as a burnt offering to the Lord. Remember, I thought I was having a son when I was pregnant. I would have named him Joshua, which means 'the Lord saves'. God did save Isaac by providing a ram to be sacrificed in his place. Then God sent His only Son as the sacrifice for our sins years later, on the same mountain where Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac.

I wondered if I was being asked to offer Joshua as a sacrifice to the Lord. In my own life I had asked God's forgiveness for walking away from Him and for the mess I found myself in. But I had also offered up my unborn child, thanking God for the privilege of carrying it, and asking Him to safeguard its life and do what was best for it.

In my mind, the right thing to do and the best thing for the baby and for me in my relationship with God was to give the baby and trust God with the outcome of that decision.

By giving Joshua for adoption I would be giving him into God's hands. I trusted that God would give him to the parents He had chosen, and ensure that Joshua had a father as well as a mother. I didn't want to be separated from my baby but I figured, rather as Abraham had about Isaac, if God wanted me to have Joshua He would give him back to me, irrespective of adoption laws and other constructs of man. God is bigger than anything; bigger than any man, exalted over all, and I knew that He can do anything and therefore could get my baby back to me if I was meant to be his mother.

The amazing thing is that this actually has been the outcome of my journey so far. Although my baby was Ella, and not Joshua, I still went through with what I felt God had told me to do. I gave

her, and although it was the most painful thing I have ever done, I knew it was the right thing to do.

It is easy to label it as a mistake, especially considering how much I loved her and how completely unprepared I was to give *her* for adoption.

But I believe that every step I have taken on this journey was ordained by God, and that the ‘mistakes’ were all a part of His plan. I see that He tested my heart in this, by asking me if I’d still trust Him with my baby and her outcome, seeing that she was not Joshua. I gave her to Him, just as Hannah gave her baby Samuel to God in the Old Testament.

* * * *

After I had given Ella for adoption I took comfort in the fact that I was not the first woman to give away a dearly loved child. Moses’ mother had been forced to do the same thing.

I wrote about this during the final year of my degree.

Moses

*Her fingers are sticky with tar.
She wipes them on her clothes,
smudging vibrant colour.
Threads cling to her fingers
as she holds her son to her chest.*

*She sings a few words
but her voice catches.
The corners of her mouth sag.
Her eyes squint shut.*

*She kisses his forehead,
lays him in the basket.
The simplicity of the action makes it possible.*

Ignoring his cries

*as the lid closes,
she hurries to the rushes.
Her daughter runs to keep up.*

*She sets the basket afloat,
speaks to her daughter.*

*Walking away,
she turns once.
The scene looks peaceful;
nothing appears untoward.*

I wrote another poem about Moses and about Ella, which attempts to express the difficulty of giving a child, even when it's in their best interests.

A Basket of Rushes

*She works quickly,
hardened fingers deftly twisting grasses.
Her daughter comes and goes,
gathering bundles for her to weave.*

*Her skill has furnished their home
with mats and pots and baskets.
Her husband has furnished her life
with love and two children.*

*Binding the final strands
her pace slackens.
She sits back on her heels,*

her hands covering her face.

This basket changes everything.

Her daughter watches.

*Leaving her pile of grasses
she walks to her mother,
toes scuffing on the sandy floor.*

“ ‘Umma?’ ”

*She winds a finger in her mother’s hair.
Holding each other,
they cry in silence.*

I also wrote a poem about the time after Ella’s birth. It was eighteen months before I could find the words to express my pain.

Birth Mother

*My empty womb and the empty car
driven in silence from the hospital
mark her passing.*

*How I held her and loved her
is not visible to the world:
her dark blue eyes, her wavy hair
the crumpled skin of fingers I kissed.*

*I wanted to see her grow up,
to bring her home to a waiting cot.
I wanted to hear her laugh, teach her songs.*

Instead I wait for a photograph.

Congratulation cards pour in, misplaced.

Flowers wilt, untended.

Full and sore with milk for her

I wait for my body to shrivel.

I want to feed her, hold her close.

I miss her warmth, her weight, her cry.

People tip-toe round me, bringing grapes.

I don't want any. I want to grieve.

Mistakenly, they leave me alone.

When I wrote the poem *Birth Mother* it was untitled. I submitted it as part of my final Creative Writing portfolio for my degree. I gave it the title 'Birth Mother' after I had read it in class, because my classmates and tutor thought it a little open-ended without a title. They said it seemed to be a poem about death, but my Tutor knew my baby hadn't died. I gave it this title because it grounded the poem, and showed to whom the emotions, if not the child, belonged.

Now, however, I think it should be untitled as it once was, because therein lies its strength. It is applicable to both the physically and the emotionally bereaved parent.

Don't forget, at the time I gave Ella for adoption, I was physically bereaved, even though she was alive.

Reading the poem, you are *meant* to assume that I lost my baby. Because to all intents and purposes I had. I never expected to see her again when I gave her to the Foster Mother. There was no lesser level of grief, just because she was alive. She was lost to me.

The poem was rightfully perceived as a poem about death: the death of my baby's attachment to me, the death to me of a life bound up in mine, as she was held in my body. It was an horrific transition, from carrying her in my body to carrying her only in my mind. It is therefore not at all surprising that I felt as though my mind would break.

It was too much to love her as I did, without being able to hold her, or see her body and life that I had carried. I had physically borne her, but am only realising now how deeply I had carried her life within me – in my spirit and my heart. No wonder I felt so heartbroken and crushed. I suppose I

had allowed her life, and the concern and care for her and what would happen to her, to crowd out my own life. When she was gone from me I had nothing left inside me. No life, nothing to nurture, and no sense of myself. My spirit was heavy and broken. My emotions were exhausted from months of tension and tugging back and forth over something I could not decide.

In the light of this understanding, it is interesting to me that in an article I wrote about my story, I focused on how God used Ella's life to save mine. I do not doubt that He did this, but I can now see another angle of what happened, which helps me understand and make sense of how broken I felt, despite having had my life handed back to me.

I can see that God has kept a very tight grip on me, because in all those months of teetering on the brink of the mental and spiritual abyss, what He used to save me very nearly killed me. It seems there was no in-between point.

I was destined either to take my own life through this grief, or to face and hold it within me again and live, no matter what came my way, the stronger for this determining experience.

Deleted Scenes

On 09.07.03 I sent a text to Ian saying:

I love this child so infinitely. It just makes my decision harder. I want2do what's best4Oyster. But that may well b2give him in love2some1else. How can I let go?

Logically, I knew it made sense to give my baby and know that he would have everything he needed. But in my spirit it made no sense at all.

* * * *

I was terrified whenever anyone mentioned having more kids in the future. I kept thinking, "What if I can't have any more kids? What if this is my only chance? What if this is my only child?" I didn't want to be childless, so I wanted to keep my baby whatever the cost, to ensure that I didn't throw away the opportunity God had given me to be a mum.

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My Auntie Heather was very supportive throughout my pregnancy – so much so that I avoided her for a few months when I thought she'd try and change my mind. She knew I wanted to keep my baby, but I didn't see how I could, so I didn't want to be faced with an even harder decision to give my baby if I'd started to believe I could keep him. During the holidays preceding Ella's birth, Mum and I stayed with Auntie Heather for a few days. I visited some friends who lived in the same town, and they picked up straight away that I didn't want to give my baby for adoption. They were really encouraging about *how* to look after him and offered everything I could possibly have needed, or help to get it. When my aunt came to pick me up and my friends spoke about things for the baby, she reinforced the line I'd said to her only earlier that afternoon. She said I didn't want to get things together for the baby because it would make it so much harder to let go. I just listened and was too afraid to speak up and say I'd changed my mind; more because of everyone else to whom I'd have to say that, than because of my aunt. I knew that my mum had already spent several months reminding me of what I had said and how I wanted to do the 'right' thing and the selfless thing. I couldn't argue, knowing I was dependent upon my parents to provide a roof over my head at least until the birth. I felt I had no way out.

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My friend had crocheted a beautiful blanket for the baby when I was pregnant and this was going to be in a box of things for Ella. I was going to write her a letter telling her how much I loved her and why I had given her for adoption. I wanted to tell her that I gave her because I loved her so much and wanted the best for her. I wanted her to have two parents, and though it tore my heart to give her, I thought I had to. I wanted to make a tape recording of me singing for her, because I love to sing. I was going to record the songs I had sung to her as a bump, the songs I sang to her in hospital after she was born, and some songs just because I wanted her to know what her birth Mummy enjoyed doing. I was going to include a set of the photos taken of her and me and my family in the hospital, as well as some of me before and during pregnancy. I was going to include photos of me as a child, so that she'd be able to see if she looked like me growing up. I had no photos of her biological father, but I wanted to include what there was about me. I really hoped that she would want to trace me when she grew up, but I knew that I could not demand this. I prayed that God

would bring us together somehow one day. I was afraid that if she died I wouldn't know, but wondered if I'd just sense in my spirit that my baby was dead. I also wondered what would happen if we passed each other on a street one day; would I recognise her? Would there be some vague memory that would spark in her mind on seeing this stranger? I didn't want to spend my life looking at the face of every baby, child, girl, woman of her age, looking for my baby; but I couldn't let her go. She was mine. She was the only thing I'd ever been given just for me, yet now she wasn't with me. I had to know if it could work out with us together. I didn't want to have to give her again, but I was desperate. I would rather have had to give her again, saying it couldn't work, than to have given her and never known if we could make it work together. She was my precious bundle and I didn't want to give her. It didn't matter to me how lovely the adoptive couple were; they weren't me and they had no idea of the grief in my heart at being rent from my little one.

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At the encouragement of my dad I opted for a closed adoption, which is one where there is no contact between the birth family and adoptive family. Prior to the point when the adoptive couple had been selected I had been anticipating Letterbox Contact. This is where the birth parents may receive a photo each year from the adoptive family, so they can see how their birth child is doing. The thing is, deciding about a lifetime when you've only seen your baby for a few hours is impossible. There is no guarantee that adoption will work out better than the baby staying with you. It is possible to have an open adoption where there is maximum contact between the two families and they may meet up and so on. However, I didn't want this because I knew if I gave my baby I would have to give it completely. There could be no hanging on because the new family would need to become my baby's family. I couldn't hinder their bonding; for their sake, for the baby's sake, or for my sake. For me, being in touch with them would have been too painful. It would have been like dangling a carrot in front of my nose that I could never have. Every success would be their success. Every celebration would be theirs to enjoy. Every birthday would be special for them and would cause me pain. I had given birth to their child, yet would not be its Mummy, and I could not get my head round that. The outworking of adoption was something I was not able to face and walk through. It was too easy to agree to it and be caught up in it during my pregnancy because I was not allowed to choose keeping my baby. Once Ella was born and I had space though, I had time to think through what it would mean not knowing that specific individual. Maybe that is why the wise women said don't make a decision until you have held your baby in your arms, because they knew that it is impossible to make a decision when you don't know *who* you're making that decision about. Having seen Ella, and knowing who she was, I couldn't give her. I knew what Joshua looked like, but Joshua never came.

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Messiah

There is nothing dignified about birth.

She just wants to sleep: her body tired, her mind bewildered.

*Was she stupid to believe an angel?
Everything changes from here.
Belief has consequences; she will have to keep this baby alive.
And who sees angels?
But she knows the truth; it grew from a seed of faith
Into her saving grace.*

*She was relieved to travel,
Away from scorn and ridicule and disbelief.
But now she is in labour.
The last thing she wants is to move on.
She doesn't feel brave; she needs her mother.
But her mother is distant, and has been for nine months.*

*Her husband is tense
Like any man on the threshold of fatherhood.
But his tension is fraught with jealousy;
Was he stupid to believe an angel?
Everything changes from here.
Belief has consequences; it has brought him shame.
How can he raise a child he didn't father?
He loves her, hates her position.
She loves him, hates her position,
Gripping a donkey's neck with grimy hands.
Sweat and tears run together;
She wants to rest from this weight.*

*Another innkeeper; another refusal.
And then her cry as the donkey stumbles.
Fear of responsibility, maybe, or compassion,
Leads to a stench-ridden stable.
Her vision weakens. Sound and smell intensifies.*

*On her knees, pushing against a hay mound,
Lowling in unison with a suckling cow.*

*Now on all fours, her hands in filth
Mouth contorted, knees groaning
Naked flesh trembling in a cold sweat -
She heaves forth her first child,
As purplish and slimy as any newborn.
Screaming.*

*Tiny fists wave in protest and shock.
The exhausted infant, birthed in blood and anguish
To parallel a prophecy of death the same,
Bleats on his mother's empty stomach.*

No beautiful nativity.

*Her hair lank with sweat,
Her body deflated and distorted
She lies now, weeping in blood,
Teenage hand limp over a greasy form.
Who can tell why she cries?
This tiny heap who stares up at her
Is her son.*

*She retches to the side.
He watches her, silent.
Is he listening to the animals
Or to his mother's sobs?
A human and hungry Saviour;
He is guided to her breast,
Child to child.
Was she stupid to believe an angel?
Everything changes from here.
Belief has consequences.*

*She kneels before the sleeping baby,
Tears streaming in the hushed stable.*

*She worships as any mother would,
But knows the outpouring of her soul
Has bound her life to his more than pregnancy ever did.*

November - December 2004

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One thing I have struggled with since having Ella back is what I count as. Am I a natural mother, having given birth to my daughter and now being her mum? To anyone who doesn't know our story, nothing is untoward. They would never know there had been a time of separation, yet I need this acknowledged, because that helps me deal with the pain of it. Am I a birth mother because I had my baby and then gave her for adoption? Yes, people can point out that I got her back, but to deny I am a birth mother is to deny what I went through. I chose giving her for adoption fully. I didn't want to give her and never see her again, but when I gave her, I knew I was deciding never to see her again. Am I an adoptive mother because I chose my daughter and was given her? Being unable to figure it out, I came up with a title: the Nabiad – Natural-Birth-Adoptive mother. However, I think my best name is Mummy! ☺